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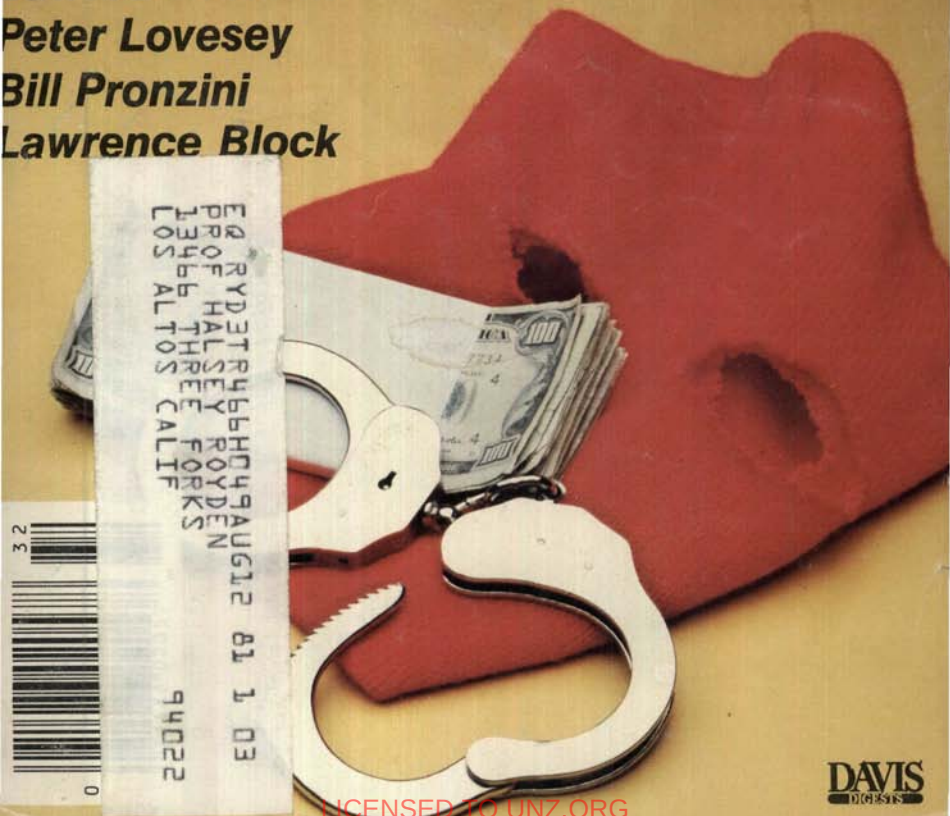

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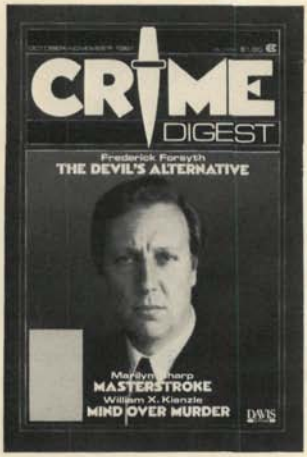

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a *NEW* Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

The killing of Michael Finnegan, an ex-Marine who lost his right arm and parts of his right leg in the line of duty, led to as intensive a manhunt and investigation as Mr. Behrens and Mr. Calder ever persisted in; and persist they did—to the final grim retribution . . . a superb thriller blending detection and action . . .

DANGEROUS GAME

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"They burned him to death," said Elfe. He said it without any attempt to soften the meaning of what he was saying. "He was almost certainly alive when they dumped him in the car and set fire to it."

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Elfe had a long sad face and gray hair. In the twenty years that he had been head of the Special Branch he had seen more brutality, more treachery, more fanaticism, more hatred than had any of his predecessors in war or in peace. Twice he had tried to retire, and twice had been persuaded to stay.

"He couldn't have put up much of a fight," said Mr. Calder, "only having one arm and one and a half legs."

They were talking about Michael Finnegan, whose charred carcass had been found in a burned-out stolen car in one of the lonelier parts of Hampstead Heath. Finnegan had been a lieutenant in the Marines until he had blown off his right arm and parts of his right leg while defusing a new type of anti-personnel mine. During his long convalescence his wife Sheilagh had held the home together, supplementing Michael's disability pension by working as a secretary. Then Finnegan had taught himself to write left-handed, and had gained a reputation and a reasonable amount of cash for his

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articles; first only in service journals, but later in the national press, where he had emerged as a commentator on men and affairs.

"It's odd," as Mr. Behrens once observed, "you'd think that he'd be a militant chauvinist. Actually he seems to be a moderate and a pacifist. It was Finnegan who started arguing that we ought to withdraw our troops from Ireland. That was long before the I.R.A. made it one of the main planks in their platform."

"You can never tell how a serious injury will affect a man," said Mr. Calder.

This was, of course, before he had become professionally involved with Michael Finnegan.

"For the last year you've been acting as his runner, haven't you?" said Elfe. "You must have got to know him well."

"Him and his wife," said Mr. Calder. "They were a great couple." He thought about the unremarkable house at Banstead with its tiny flower garden in front and its rather larger kitchen garden in the rear, both of which Michael Finnegan tended one-armed, hobbling down between times for a pint at the local. A respected man with many friends and acquaintances, none of whom knew he was playing a lonely, patient, dangerous game. His articles in the papers, his casual contacts, his letters to old friends in Ireland and conversations with new friends in the pub, all had been slanted toward a predetermined end.

The fact was that the shape of the I.R.A.'s activities was changing, a change which had been forced on them by the systematic penetration of their groups in England. Now, when an act of terrorism was planned, the operators came from Ireland to carry it out, departing as soon as it was done. They traveled a roundabout route, via Morocco or Tunis, entering England from France or Belgium and returning by the same way. Explosives, detonators, and other material for the job came separately, and in advance. Their one essential requirement was an operational base where materials could be stored and the operators could lodge for the few days needed for the job.

It was to hold out his house as such a safe base that every move in Michael Finnegan's life had been planned.

"We agreed," said Mr. Calder, "that as far as possible Michael should have no direct contacts of any sort with the security forces. What the Department did was to lease a house which had a good view, from its front windows, of Michael's back gate. They installed one of their pensioners in it, old Mrs. Lovelock—"

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"Minnie Lovelock?" said Elfe. "She used to type for me forty years ago. I was terrified of her, even then."

"All she had to do was to keep Michael's kitchen window sill under observation at certain hours. There was a simple code of signals. A flower pot meant the arrival of explosives or arms. One or more milk bottles signaled the arrival of that number of operators. And the house gave us one further advantage. Minnie put it about that she had sublet a room on the ground floor to a commercial gentleman who kept his samples there, and occasionally put up there for the night. For the last year the commercial gent was me. I was able to slip out, after dark, up the garden path and in at the back door of Michael's house. I tried to do it at least once a month. My ostensible job was to collect any information Michael might have for us. In fact, I believe my visits kept him sane. We used to talk for hours. He liked to hear the gossip, all about the interdepartmental feuds, and funny stories about the Minister."

"And about the head of the Special Branch?"

"Oh, certainly. He particularly enjoyed the story of how two of your men tried to arrest each other."

Elfe grunted, and said, "Go on."

"And there was one further advantage. Michael had a key to this room. In a serious emergency he could deposit a message—after dark, of course—or even use it as an escape hatch for Sheilagh and himself."

"Did his wife know what he was up to?"

"She had to be told something, if only to explain my visits. Our cover story was that Michael was gathering information about subversion in the docks. This was plausible, as he'd done an Intelligence job in the Marines. She may have suspected that it was more than that. She never interfered. She's a grand girl."

Elfe said, "Yes," and after a pause, "Yes. That's really what I wanted to tell you. I've had a word with your chief. He agrees with me. This is a job we can't use you in."

"Oh," said Mr. Calder coldly. "Why not?"

"Because you'd feel yourself personally involved. You'd be unable to be sufficiently dispassionate about it. You knew Finnegan and his wife far too well."

Mr. Calder thought about that. If Fortescue had backed the prohibition it would be little use kicking. He said, "I suppose we *are* doing something about it."

"Of course. Superintendent Outram and Sergeant Fallows are

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handling it. They're both members of the A.T. squad, and very capable operators."

"I know Tom Outram," said Mr. Calder. "He's a sound man. I'll promise not to get under his feet. But I'm already marginally involved. If he wants to question Sheilagh he'll have to do it at my cottage. I moved her straight down there as soon as I heard the news. Gave her a strong sleeping pill and put her to bed."

"They wondered where she'd disappeared to. I'll tell them she's living with you."

"If you put it quite like that," said Mr. Calder, "it might be misunderstood. She's being chaperoned, by Rasselas."

"I think," said Superintendent Outram, "that we'd better see Mrs. Finnegan alone. That is, if you don't mind."

He and Sergeant Fallows had driven out to Mr. Calder's cottage, which was built on a shoulder of the North Downs above Lamperdown in Kent.

"I don't mind," said Mr. Calder. "But you'll have to look out for Rasselas."

"Your dog?"

"Yes. Mrs. Finnegan's still in a state of shock, and Rasselas is very worried about it. The postman said something sharp to her—not meaning any harm at all—and he went for him. Luckily I was there and I was able to stop him."

"Couldn't we see her without Rasselas?"

"I wouldn't care to try and shift him."

Outram thought about it. Then he said, "Then I think you'd better sit in with us."

"I think that might be wise," said Mr. Calder gravely.

Sheilagh Finnegan had black hair and a white face out of which looked eyes of startling Irish blue. Her mouth was thin and tight and angry. It was clear that she was under stress. When Outram and Fallows came in she took one look at them and jerked as though an electric shock had gone through her.

Rasselas, who was stretched out on the floor beside her, raised his head and regarded the two men thoughtfully.

"Just like he was measuring us for a coffin," said Fallows afterward.

Mr. Calder sat on the sofa, and put one hand on the dog's head.

It took Outram fifteen minutes of patient, low-keyed questioning to discover that Mrs. Finnegan could tell him very little. Her hus-

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band, she said, had suggested that she needed a vacation, and had arranged for her to spend a week in a small private hotel at Folkestone. She wasn't sorry to agree because she hadn't had a real holiday in the last three or four years.

Outram nodded sympathetically. Had the holiday been fixed suddenly? Out of the blue, like? Sheilagh gave more attention to this than she had to some of the earlier questions. She said, "We'd often talked about it before. Michael knew I had friends at Folkestone."

"But on this occasion it was your husband who suggested it? How long before you left?"

"Two or three days."

"Then it *was* fairly sudden."

"Fairly sudden, yes."

"Did he give any particular reason? Had he had an unexpected message? Something like that."

"He didn't say anything about a message. I wouldn't have known about it, anyway. I was out at work all day."

Outram said, "Yes, of course."

There was nothing much more she could tell them. A quarter of an hour later the two men drove off. As their car turned down the hill they passed Mr. Behrens, who was walking up from Lamperdown. Mr. Behrens waved to the Superintendent.

"Looks a genial old cove," said Sergeant Fallows.

"That's what he looks like," agreed Outram.

When Mr. Behrens reached the cottage he found Mr. Calder and Sheilagh making coffee in the kitchen. They added a third cup to the tray and carried it back to the sitting room where Rasselas was apparently asleep. By contrast with what had gone before it was a relaxed and peaceful scene.

Mr. Calder tried the coffee, found it still too hot, put the cup carefully back on its saucer, and said, "Why were you holding out on the Superintendent?"

"How did you know I was holding out?"

"Rasselas and I both knew it."

Hearing his name the great dog opened one brown eye, as though to confirm what Mr. Calder had said, and then shut it again.

"If I tell you about it," said Sheilagh, "you'll understand why I was holding out."

"Then tell us at once," said Mr. Behrens.

"Of course I knew something was in the wind. I didn't know exactly what Michael was up to. He was careful not to tell me any details.

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But whatever it was he was doing, I realized it was coming to a head. That was why he sent me away. He said it shouldn't be more than two or three days. He'd get word to me as soon as he could. That was on the Friday. I had a miserable weekend, you can imagine. Monday came, and Tuesday, and still no word. By Wednesday I couldn't take it any longer. What I did was wrong, I know, but I couldn't help myself."

"You went back," said Mr. Calder. He said it sympathetically.

"That's just what I did. I planned it all carefully. I wasn't going to barge in and upset all Michael's plans. I just wanted to see he was all right and go away again. He'd given me a key to that room in Mrs. Lovelock's house. I got there after dark. There's a clear view from the window straight into our kitchen. The light was on and the curtains weren't drawn."

As she talked she was living the scene. Mr. Behrens pictured her, crouched in the dark, like an eager theater-goer in the gallery staring down onto the lighted stage.

She said, "I could see Michael. He was boiling a kettle on the stove and moving about, setting out cups and plates. There were two other people in the room. I could see the legs of a man who was sitting at the kitchen table. Once, when he leaned forward, I got a glimpse of him. All I could tell you was he was young and had black hair. The other was a girl. I saw her quite plainly. She was dark, too. Medium height and rather thin. The sort of girl who could dress as a man and get away with it.

"I got the impression, somehow, that they'd just arrived, and Michael was bustling about making them at home. The girl still had her outdoor coat on. Maybe that's what gave me the idea. Just then I saw another man coming. He was walking along the road which runs behind our kitchen garden, and when he stopped, he was right under the window where I was sitting. When he opened the gate I could see that he was taking a lot of trouble not to make any noise. He shut the gate very gently, and stood there for a moment, looking at the lighted kitchen window. Then he tiptoed up the garden path and stood, to one side of the kitchen window, looking in. That's when I saw his face clearly for the first time."

Sheilagh was speaking more slowly now. Mr. Calder was leaning forward with his hands on his knees. Rasselas was no longer pretending to be asleep. Mr. Behrens could feel the tension without understanding it.

"Then he seemed to make up his mind. He went across to the

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kitchen door, opened it without knocking, and went in quickly, as though he was planning to surprise the people inside. Next moment someone had dragged the curtains across. From the moment I first saw that man I knew he meant harm to Michael. But once the curtains were shut I couldn't see what was happening."

"You couldn't see," said Mr. Calder. "But could you hear?"

"Nothing. On account of Mrs. Lovelock's television set in the room just above me. She's deaf and keeps it on full strength. All I could do was sit and wait. It must have been nearly an hour later when I saw the back door open. All the lights in the house had been turned out and it was difficult to see, but Michael was between the two men. They seemed to be supporting him. The girl was walking behind. They came out and turned up the road. Then I noticed there was a car parked about twenty yards farther up. They all got into it. And I went on sitting there. I couldn't think what to do."

There was a moment of silence. Neither of the men wanted to break it. Sheilagh said, "I do realize now that I should have done something. I should have run down, screamed—anything to stop them taking Michael away like that. But I didn't know what was happening. Going with them might all have been part of his plan."

"It was an impossible situation," said Mr. Calder.

"When you thought about it afterwards," said Mr. Behrens, "am I right about this? You got the impression that things had been going smoothly until that other man arrived, and that he was the one who upset things."

"He was the one who gave Michael away," said Sheilagh. "I'm sure of it." There was a different note in her voice now. Something hard and very cold.

"I agree with Calder," said Mr. Behrens. "You couldn't have done anything else at the time. But as soon as you knew that things had gone wrong for Michael, why didn't you tell the police everything that you've just told us? Time was vital. You could give a good description of two of the people involved. Surely there wasn't a moment to lose."

Sheilagh said, "I didn't go to the police because I recognized the man, the one who arrived on foot. I'd seen his photograph. Michael had pointed it out to me in the paper. I only saw him clearly as he stood outside the lighted window, but I was fairly certain I was right." She paused, then added, "Now I'm quite certain."

Both men looked at her.

She said, "It was Sergeant Fallows."

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The silence that followed was broken unexpectedly. Rasselas gave a growl at the back of his throat, got up, stalked to the door, pushed it open with his nose, and went out. They heard him settling down again outside.

"That's where he goes when he's on guard," said Mr. Calder.

There was another silence.

"I know what you're thinking," said Sheilagh. "You both think I'm crazy, but I'm not. It *was* Fallows."

"Not an easy face to forget," agreed Mr. Calder, "and it would explain something that has been puzzling me. We'd taken such tight precautions over Michael that I didn't see how they could suddenly have known that he was a plant. He might eventually have done something, or said something, which gave him away. They might have got suspicious. But not certain. Not straight away. It could only have happened like that if he was betrayed, and the only person who could have betrayed him was someone working in the Squad."

Mr. Behrens' mind had been moving on a different line. He said, "When they got into the car, and turned the lights on, you'd have been able to see the number plate at the back, I take it."

"That's right. I saw it and wrote it down. I've put it here. LKK 910 P."

"Good girl. Now think back. When you were talking about the last man to arrive you called him 'the one who came on foot.' What made you say that?"

Sheilagh said, "I'm not sure. I suppose because he came from the opposite direction to where the car was parked. So I assumed—"

"I'm not disputing it. In fact, I'm sure you were right. Fallows wouldn't have driven up in a police car. He wouldn't even have risked taking his own car. He'd have gone by bus or train to the nearest point and walked the rest of the way."

Mr. Calder said, "Then the car belong to the Irish couple. Of course they might have stolen it, like the one they left on the Heath."

"They might. But why risk it? It would only draw attention to them, which was the last thing they wanted. My guess is that they hired it. Just for the time they were planning to be here."

"If you're right," said Mr. Calder, "there's a lot to do and not much time to do it. You'd better trace that car. And remember, we've been officially warned off, so you can't use the police computer."

"LKK's a Kent number. I've got a friend in County Hall who'll help."

"I'll look into the Fallows end of it. It'll mean leaving you alone

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here for a bit, Sheilagh, but if anyone should turn up and cause trouble, Rasselas will attend to him."

"In case there might be two of them," said Mr. Behrens, "you'd better take this. It's loaded. That's the safety catch. You push it down when you want to fire."

The girl examined the gun with interest. She said, "I've never used one, but I suppose, if I got quite close to the man, pointed it at his stomach, and pulled the trigger—"

"The results should be decisive," said Mr. Behrens.

Fallows was whistling softly to himself as he walked along the carpeted corridor to the door of his flat. It was on the top floor of a new block on the Regent's Park side of Albany Street and seemed an expensive pad for a detective sergeant. He opened the door, walked down the short hall into the living room, switched on the light, and stopped.

A middle-aged man, with graying hair and steel-rimmed glasses, was standing by the fireplace regarding him benevolently. Fallows recognized him, but had no time to be surprised. As he stepped forward something soft but heavy hit him on the back of the neck.

When he came round, about five minutes later, he was seated in a heavy chair. His arms had been attached to the arms of the chair and his legs to the chair's legs by yards of elastic bandage, wound round and round. Mr. Behrens was examining the contents of an attaché case which he had brought with him. Mr. Calder was watching him. Both men were in their shirtsleeves and were wearing surgical gloves.

"I think our patient is coming round," said Mr. Calder.

"What the bloody hell are you playing at?" said Fallows.

Mr. Behrens said, "First, I'm going to give you these pills. They're ordinary sleeping pills. I think four should be sufficient. We don't want him actually to go to sleep. Just to feel drowsy."

"Bloody hell you will."

"If you want me to wedge your mouth open, hold your nose, and hit you on the throat each time until you swallow, I'm quite prepared to do it, but it would be undignified and rather painful."

Fallows glared at him, but there was an implacable look behind the steel spectacles which silenced him. He swallowed the pills.

Mr. Behrens looked at his watch and said, "We'll give them five minutes to start working. What we're trying"—he turned courteously back to Fallows—"is an experiment which has often been

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suggested but never, I think, actually performed. We're going to give you successive doses of scopolamine dextrin to inhale, while we ask you some questions. In the ordinary way I have no doubt you would be strong enough to resist the scopolamine until you became unconscious. There are men who have sufficient resources of will power to do that. That's why we first weaken your resistance with a strong sedative. Provided we strike exactly the right balance, the results should be satisfactory. About ready now, I think."

He took a capsule from a box on the table and broke it under Fallows' nose.

"The snag about this method," Mr. Behrens continued, in the same level tones of a professor addressing a class of students, "is that the interreaction of the sedative and the stimulant would be so sharp that it might, if persisted with, affect the subject's heart. You'll appreciate therefore—head up, Sergeant—that by prolonging our dialogue you may be risking your own life. Now then. Let's start with your visit to Banstead—"

This produced a single, sharp obscenity.

Fifty minutes later Mr. Behrens switched off his tape recorder. He said, "I think he's gone. I did warn him that it might happen if he fought too hard."

"And my God, did he fight," said Mr. Calder. He was sweating. "We'd better set the scene. I think he'd look more convincing if we put him on his bed."

He was unwinding the elastic bandages and was glad to see that, in spite of Fallows' struggles, they had left no mark. The nearly empty bottle of sleeping pills, a half-empty bottle of whiskey, and a tumbler were arranged on the bedside table. Mr. Behrens closed Fallows' flaccid hand round the tumbler, then knocked it onto the floor.

"Leave the bedside light on," said Mr. Calder. "No one commits suicide in the dark."

"I've done a transcript of the tape for you," said Sheilagh. "I've cut out some of the swearing, but otherwise it's all there. There's no doubt now that he betrayed Michael, is there?"

"None at all," said Mr. Behrens. "That was something he seemed almost proud of. The trouble was that when we edged up to one of the things we really wanted to know, an automatic defense mechanism seemed to take over, and when we fed him a little more scopolamine to break through it, he started to ramble."

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"All the same," said Mr. Calder, "we know a good deal. We know what they're planning to do, and roughly when. But not how."

Mr. Behrens was studying the neatly typed paper. He said, "J.J. That's clear enough. Jumping Judas. It's their name for Mr. Justice Jellicoe. That's their target, all right. They've been gunning for him ever since he sent down the Manchester bombers. I've traced their car. It was hired in Dover last Friday, for ten days. The man they hired it from told them he had another customer who wanted it on Monday afternoon. They said that suited them because they were planning to let him have it back by one o'clock that day, Monday. Which means that whatever they're going to do is timed to be done sometime on Monday morning, and they aim to be boarding a cross-Channel ferry by the time it happens."

"They might have been lying to the man," said Sheilagh.

"Yes. They might have been. But bear in mind that if they brought the car back on Saturday afternoon or Sunday the hire firm would be shut for the weekend and they'd have to leave the car standing about in the street, which would call attention to it. No. I think they've got a timetable, and they're sticking to it."

"Which gives us three days to find out what it is," said Mr. Calder. "If the payoff is on Monday there are two main possibilities. Jellicoe spends his weekends at his country house at Witham, in Essex. He's pretty safe there. He's got a permanent police guard and three boxer dogs that are devoted to him. He comes up to court on Monday by car, with a police driver. All right, that's one chance. They could arrange some sort of ambush. Detonate one of their favorite long-distance mines. Not easy, though, because there are three different routes the car can take. This isn't the Ulster border. They can't go round laying minefields all over Essex."

"The alternative," said Mr. Behrens, "is to try something in or around the Law Courts. We'll have to split this. You take the Witham end. Have a word with the bodyguard. They may not know that we've been warned off, so they'll probably cooperate. I'll tackle the London end."

"Isn't there something I could do?" said Sheilagh.

"Yes," said Mr. Calder. "There is. Play that tape over and over again. Twenty times. Until you know it by heart. There was something inside Fallows' muddled brain, something trying to get out. It may be a couple of words. Even a single word. If you can interpret it, it could be the key to the whole thing."

So Friday was spent by Mr. Calder at Witham, making friends

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with a police sergeant and a police constable; by Sheilagh Finnegan listening to the drug-induced ramblings of the man who had been responsible for her husband's death; and by Mr. Behrens investigating the possibility of blowing up a judge in court.

As a first step Mr. Behrens introduced himself to Major Haines. The Major, after service in the Royal Marines, had been given the job of supervising security at the Law Courts. He had known Michael Finnegan, and was more than willing to help.

He said, "It's a rambling great building. I think the chap who designed it had a Ruritanian palace in mind. Narrow windows, heavy doors, battlements and turrets, and iron gratings. The judges have a private entrance, which is inside the car park. Everyone else, barristers, solicitors, visitors, all have to use the front door in the Strand, or the back door in Carey Street. They're both guarded, of course. Teams of security officers, good men. Mostly ex-policemen."

"I was watching them for a time, first thing this morning," said Mr. Behrens. "Most people had to open their bags and cases, but there were people carrying sort of blue-and-red washing bags. They let them through uninspected."

"They'd be barristers, or barristers' clerks, and they'd let them through because they knew their faces. But I can assure you of one thing. When Mr. Justice Jellicoe is on the premises everyone opens everything."

"Which court will he be using?"

Major Haines consulted the printed list. "On Monday he's in Court Number Two. That's one of the courts at the back. I'll show you."

He led the way down the vast entrance hall. Mr. Behrens saw what he meant when he described it as a palace. Marble columns, spiral staircases, interior balconies, and an elaborately tesselated floor.

"Up these stairs," said Haines. "That's Number Two Court. And there's the rear door, straight ahead of you. It leads out into Carey Street."

"So that anyone making for Court Number Two would be likely to come this way."

"Not if they were coming from the Strand."

"True," said Mr. Behrens. "I think I'll hang around for a bit and watch the form."

He went back to the main hall and found himself a seat, which commanded the front entrance.

It was now ten o'clock and the flow of people coming in was con-

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tinuous. They were channeled between desks placed lengthways, and three security guards were operating. They did their job thoroughly. Occasionally, when they recognized a face, a man was waved through. Otherwise everyone opened whatever they were carrying and placed it on top of the desk. Suitcases, briefcases, even womens' handbags were carefully examined. The red-and-blue bags which, Mr. Behrens decided, must contain law books, were sometimes looked into, sometimes not. But they would all be looked into on Monday morning.

"It looked pretty watertight to me," said Mr. Behrens to Sheilagh and Mr. Calder, as they compared notes after supper. "Enough explosive to be effective would be bulky and an elaborate timing device would add to the weight and bulk. They might take a chance and put the whole thing in the bottom of one of those book bags and hope it wouldn't be looked at, but they don't seem to me to be people who would take chances of that sort."

"Could the stuff have been brought in during the weekend and left somewhere in the Court?"

"I put it to Haines. He said, 'No.' The building is shut on Friday evening and given a thorough going-over on Saturday."

"Sheilagh and I have worked one thing out," said Mr. Behrens. "There's a reference, towards the end, to 'fields.' In the transcript it's been reproduced as 'in the fields,' and the assumption was that the attempt was going to be made in the country, when Jellicoe was driving up to London. But if you listen very carefully it isn't 'in the fields.' It's 'in fields' with the emphasis on the first word, and there's a sort of crackle in the tape before it which makes it difficult to be sure; but I think what he's saying is 'Lincoln's Inn Fields'."

They listened once more to the tape.

Mr. Calder said, "I think you're right."

"And it does explain one point," said Mr. Behrens. "When I explored the area this morning it struck me how difficult it was to park a car. But Lincoln's Inn Fields could be ideal—there are parking spaces all down the South and East sides, and the South East corner is less than two hundred yards from the rear entrance to the Courts."

"Likely enough," said Mr. Calder, "but it still doesn't explain how they're going to get the stuff in. Did you get anything else out of the tape, Sheilagh?"

"I made a list of the words and expressions he used most often. Some were just swearing, but apart from that his mind seemed to

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be on the subject of time. He said 'midday' and 'twelve o'clock' a dozen times at least. And he talks about a 'midday special.' That seemed to be some sort of joke. He doesn't actually use the word 'explosion,' but he talks once or twice about a report, or reports."

"Report?" said Mr. Calder thoughtfully. "That sounds more like a shot from a gun than a bomb."

"It's usually in the plural. Reports."

"Several guns."

"Rather elaborate, surely. Hidden rifles, trained on the Bench, and timed to go off at midday?"

"And it still doesn't explain how he gets the stuff past the guards," said Mr. Behrens.

He took the problem down the hill with him to his house in Lamperdown village and carried it up to bed. He knew, from experience, that he would get little sleep until he had solved it. The irritating thing was that the answer was there. He was sure of it. He had only to remember what he had seen and connect it up with the words on the tape, and the solution would appear, as inevitably as the jackpot came out of the slot when you hit three lemons in a row.

Visualize the people, pouring through the entrance into the building, carrying briefcases, book bags, handbags. One man had had a camera slung over his shoulder. The guard had called his attention to a notice prohibiting the taking of photographs in Court. This little episode had held up the queue for a moment. The young man behind, a barrister's clerk Mr. Behrens guessed, had been in a hurry, and had pushed past the camera owner. He had not been searched, because he hadn't been carrying a case. But he had been carrying *something*. When Mr. Behrens reached this point he did, in fact, doze off, so that the solution must have reached him in his sleep.

Next morning, after breakfast, he telephoned his solicitor, catching him before he set out for the golf course. He said, "When you go into Court and have to tell the judge what another judge said in another case—"

"Quote a precedent, you mean."

"That's right. Well, do you take the book with you, or is it already in Court?"

"Both. There's a complete set of Reports in Court. Several sets, in fact. They're for the judges. And you bring your own with you."

"That might mean lugging in a lot of books."

"A trolleyful sometimes."

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"Suppose you had, say, five or six sets of Reports to carry. How would you manage."

"I'd get my clerk to carry them."

"All right," said Mr. Behrens patiently, "how would he manage?"

"If it was just half a dozen books, he's got a sort of strap affair, with a handle."

"That's what I thought I remembered seeing," said Mr. Behrens. "Thank you very much."

"I suppose you've got some reason for asking all these questions?"

"An excellent reason."

His solicitor, who knew Mr. Behrens well, said no more.

"We'll get there early," said Mr. Calder, "and park as close as we can to the South East corner. There's plenty of cover in the garden and we can watch both lines of cars. As soon as one of us spots LKK 910P he tips off the others using one of these pocket radios. Quite easy, Sheilagh. Just press the button and talk. Then let it go, and listen."

"That doesn't sound too difficult," said Sheilagh. "What then?"

"Then Henry gets busy."

"Who's Henry?"

"An old friend of mine who'll be coming with us. His job is to unlock the boot of their car as soon as they're clear of it. By my reckoning he'll have ten minutes for the job, which will be nine and a half minutes more than he needs."

The man and girl walked up Searle Street, not hurrying, but not wasting time, crossed Carey Street, climbed the five shallow steps, and pushed through the swing doors and into the Court building.

Mr. Behrens had got there before them. He was standing on the far side of the barrier. A little queue had already formed and he had plenty of time to observe them.

They had dressed for the occasion with ritual care. The man in a dark suit, cream shirt, and dark red tie. The girl in the uniform of a female barrister, black dress, black shoes and stockings, with a single touch of color, the collar points of a yellow shirt showing at the throat.

As he watched them edge forward to the barrier, Mr. Behrens felt a prickle of superstitious dread. They may have been nervous, but they showed no sign of it. They looked serious and composed, like the young crusaders who, for the more thorough purging of the holy

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places, mutilated the living bodies of their pagan prisoners; like the novices who watched impassively at the auto-da-fé where men and women were burned to the greater glory of God.

Now they were at the barrier. The girl was carrying a book bag and a satchel. She opened them both. The search was thorough and took time. The man showed very slight signs of impatience.

Mr. Behrens thought, they've rehearsed this very carefully.

When it came to the man's turn, he placed the six books, held together in a white strap, on the counter and opened his briefcase. The guard searched the briefcase, and nodded. The man picked up the books and the briefcase and walked down the short length of corridor to where the girl was standing. He ignored her, turned the corner, and made for Court Number 2.

Although it was not yet ten o'clock there were already a number of people in the courtroom. Two elderly barristers were standing by the front bench discussing something. Behind them a girl was arranging a pile of books and papers. The young man placed his six books, still strapped together, on the far end of the back bench, and went out as quietly as he had come in. No one took any notice of him.

A minute later Mr. Behrens appeared, picked up the books, and left. No one took any notice of him either.

When the young man came out he joined the girl and they moved off together. Having come in by the back entrance it was evidently their intention to leave by the front. They had gone about ten paces when a man stopped them. He said, "Excuse me, but have you got your cards?"

"Cards?" said the young man. He seemed unconcerned.

"We're issuing personal identity cards to all barristers using the court. Your clerk should have told you. If you'd come with me I'll give you yours."

The girl looked at her companion, who nodded slightly, and they set off after their guide. He led the way down a long empty passage toward the western annex to the Courts.

The young man closed up behind the guide. He put his hand into a side pocket, pulled out a leather cosh, moved a step closer, and hit the man on the head. The guide fell forward onto his knees and rolled over onto his face.

The young man and the girl had swung round and were moving back the way they had come.

"Walk, don't run," said the young man.

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They turned a corner and went down a spiral staircase which led to the main hall and the front entrance.

When they were outside, and circling the Court building, the girl said, "That man. Did you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"When you hit him. He was expecting it."

"What do you mean?"

"He started to fall forward just before you hit him. It must have taken most of the force out of the blow."

Without checking his pace the young man said, "Do you think he was a plant? Holding us up so they could get to the car ahead of us?"

"I thought it might be."

The young man put one hand on the shoulder holster inside his coat and said, "If that's right, you'll see some fireworks."

There was no one waiting for them by the car. The nearest person to the car was a small man, with a face like a friendly monkey, who was sitting on a bench inside the garden reading the *Daily Mirror*.

No one tried to stop them as they drove out of Lincoln's Inn Fields and turned south toward the Embankment. "Twenty past ten," said the young man, "good timing."

They were five miles short of Dover, on the bare escarpment over Bridge, before he spoke again. He said, "Twelve o'clock. Anytime now."

Either his watch was fast or the timing mechanism was slow. It was fully five minutes later when their car went up in a searing sheet of white flame.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

We all know Mr. Leonard Strang, the gnomelike little science teacher at Aldershot High School; and now, in this new case, we meet his partner-in-criminology, a Vietnamese boy named Hung Nguyen, known as "The Mnemonic Kid" . . .

MR. STRANG INTERPRETS A PICTURE

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

The daylight robbery of the Gorham Savings and Loan in downtown Aldershot occurred shortly before 9:00 a.m. on the Tuesday after Labor Day. It was the most exciting thing to have happened in that small suburban community since Honora McCrea retrieved her husband from an all-night poker game at the point of a loaded shotgun.

The robbery became common knowledge throughout Aldershot within half an hour, having been passed along at incredible speed via the phone and the more personal "back-fence telegraph." Amid huge mounds of gossip and speculation a few facts emerged. Some time before eight o'clock the two robbers parked their car in the alley which ran alongside the venerable bank building. After disabling the ancient outer alarm by filling its mechanism as well as its gong with heavy grease, the men forced open the side door and concealed themselves in a broom closet.

At exactly eight Carl Felloes, the bank's president, arrived, accompanied by his daughter Sue, who was a teller. They entered through the front door, to which Felloes had the only key. "Those guys must have been looking out at me as I sat at my desk," Felloes

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told Detective Sergeant Paul Roberts later. "And me not suspecting a thing."

Ten minutes later Felloes admitted Norma Sanchez and Eddie Friedlander, the two other tellers. A few moments after that the guard, Horace Cubb, arrived. Horace, it should be noted, was old and forgetful, and the job of guard was something of a sinecure. He was forbidden to put bullets in the gun he wore at his hip, a fact of which the robbers seemed to be aware.

Once the entire staff was assembled, the front door was re-locked to await opening time at nine o'clock. As soon as the bolt was slammed home, locking the door, the robbers showed themselves. Each carried a revolver, and each wore gloves and a knitted ski mask that covered the entire face.

In the street outside the two huge floor-to-ceiling windows, each with its blind drawn, business went on as usual in Aldershot. Within the bank the robbers worked smoothly and efficiently. The tellers at their stations, as well as Horace Cubb, stood with upraised hands. One of the robbers directed Carl Felloes to the huge vault door at the rear of the building. At 8:40 the time lock clicked and the ponderous door was swung open. Felloes was compelled to fill two pillowcases with all the available cash—about $60,000.

The bank employees were bound and gagged. The robbers left by the same side door through which they had entered and drove off with their haul. Nobody outside the bank noticed anything unusual.

There's no telling how long the bank's staff might have remained on the floor in helpless bondage if JoAnne Hewes of the Ounces of Flounces Sewing Shoppe hadn't been impatient to make an early deposit. At 9:15, having waited ten minutes on the bank's front step with no signs of life from inside, she began banging on the front door. Getting no answer, she alerted the police. The damaged side door was spotted, and the bank's staff were found and released.

Beyond the evident fact that a robbery had taken place, the evidence developed by the local and state police during the next several days would have fitted under a gnat's eyelid with plenty of room to spare. The robbers seemed to have melted into thin air with no signs—aside from the missing money—of their having been in the bank at all.

"We have no leads at this time," was all Paul Roberts could tell a group of reporters one morning ten days after the robbery. What the detective said to his pretty wife Bobbi when he arrived home

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that evening, exhausted, angry, and frustrated at having chased down yet another false lead, is best left to the imagination . . .

Mr. Leonard Strang steered his old maroon sedan into the parking area of the Eldrich P. Noble Elementary School. He got out stiffly, muttering in annoyance. Each year, two weeks into the fall semester, it was the practice of Aldershot High School to send one of its teachers to the district's elementary schools to speak to the eighth graders. The idea was to make the potential freshmen eager to begin their secondary education.

This year Mr. Strang had been unwillingly dragooned into service by his principal, Mr. Guthrey. And the gnomelike science teacher didn't have the foggiest idea of what to say to the children he'd be addressing.

Much to his surprise he did quite a creditable job at the impromptu assembly program. He decided to forego the "gee whiz" approach and simply describe the science courses. Speaking in a soft voice and with no attempt at dramatic declamation, he nevertheless was able to communicate to the students his own sense of awe and wonder at the countless miracles to be found in the everyday world and in the heavens above. Even his few creaking attempts at humor were met by gales of laughter. He finished to a deafening round of applause.

He had more than an hour before he was due at the next school. Plenty of time to pay Margaret Lakmund a visit.

Margaret Lakmund had been hired as a part-time elementary-school art teacher for the district only a year after Mr. Strang himself. As art was considered a "frill," her beginning salary was $1900. Often she and the young Leonard Strang had shared meager suppers at the end of the month while awaiting payday. There'd never been anything romantic in their relationship in spite of the tittered suggestions of other teachers. Maggie Lakmund was simply a good friend of long standing.

She was teaching a class of chattering third graders when Mr. Strang entered the classroom. The children had made bright designs on drawing paper with wax crayons. Now they were coating the paper with black paint, gasping in wonder as the watery pigment refused to adhere to the wax, allowing the designs to show through.

"Leonard, you old reprobate!" Maggie cried out with an earthy laugh when she caught sight of Mr. Strang. "What are you doing in these parts?"

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"I just dropped in to see if you're keeping the kids up to the high standards we expect in high school," replied Mr. Strang with a grin.

"Standards!" Maggie wiped thin delicate fingers on her smock and then ran them through her mop of gray hair. "From what I hear, the only period when anything gets done over at that high school is lunchtime."

Both Mr. Strang and Maggie chuckled at the children's awed reaction to their joking.

"Sorry if I disturbed your class," said the science teacher. "I'd better be on my way."

"You just got here," Maggie replied. "Sit down and take a load off those old bones. It's time for the kids to pick up, and I'm free next period. We can gab for a while."

She turned to the class. "Cleanup time!" she announced. "Meatball—Dizzy. You're class monitors today. Get those brushes cleaned and put away. On the double!"

A plump boy in short pants and a tiny girl with braided hair obediently began collecting the brushes and taking them to the sink. "Meatball, I can understand," said Mr. Strang, eyeing the boy's paunch. "But Dizzy?"

"Desiderata Van Cleef," replied Maggie. "Everybody calls her Dizzy. If her parents hang a handle like that on the poor kid, what can they expect?"

The children were lined up with Meatball at the head. Before opening the door, Maggie patted his head. He looked up at her with an expression of total adoration.

"You haven't lost your touch, Maggie," said Mr. Strang after the room had cleared. "You always had a way with kids."

"Yeah, I'm surrogate mother to a lot of 'em," Maggie said. "Broken homes, parents who'd rather be on the golf course than looking after their children. I'm amazed that some of the kids turn out as well as they do."

Mr. Strang turned his head to look at the art work displayed on the bulletin boards that covered three sides of the room. "Those dogs are funny," he said, pointing to a display near the door. "They look as if they're made out of soap bubbles."

"Look again," said Maggie. "Those are horses. Just as I've always said. You high-school teachers have no artistic imagination at all."

A large picture at the front of the room caught Mr. Strang's eye. He shuffled over to look at it.

The picture had been done in thin lines of black paint with no

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color added. One horizontal line divided the top and bottom of the paper into equal sections. On this line three circles about the size of quarters seemed to be resting. From each circle two lines sprouted upward, resembling long ears. Every circle had a dome over it, somewhat like an inverted U. And a larger circle dominated the rest of the paper's upper area.

"Looks a little like three Hindus praying to the sun or something," murmured Mr. Strang. "What else have we got here?"

Below the bisecting line were two other small circles. Each rested on a horizontal line some three inches long. And two lines branched—downward, this time—from them both.

"Stick figures, probably," he mused. "But why blacken in the circles instead of putting faces on them?"

Finally, in the lower right corner was what looked like a shoebox supported by yet another pair of circles.

"Maybe those things on the dividing line are rabbits under bell jars," said Mr. Strang with a chuckle. "Anyway, this young genius seems to be into his circular period."

"Never guess about what a child's drawing is," said Maggie. "If you're wrong, he'll be crushed."

She came over and looked at the name printed on the back of the paper. "Oh, yeah. This one was done by The Mnemonic Kid."

"Who?"

"It's a little Vietnamese boy in the first grade. Hung Nguyen." The name came to Mr. Strang's ears as "N'win."

"But why do you call him The Mnemonic Kid?" he asked.

"The kid's got a memory like a steel trap, that's why. He came here last spring not knowing a word of English. Now he can speak well enough to be understood, and he even prints a little, and he knows his numbers up to a hundred."

"I'm sure he's very bright," said Mr. Strang. "But mnemonics has to do strictly with memory development, Maggie, and—"

"And you ought to see that boy play Kim's Game, Leonard."

"Huh?"

"Kim's Game. It's a test of memory. You put fifteen or twenty different articles—common things like coins and keys and pencils—on a tray. Each kid looks at the tray for exactly one minute. Then, after the tray's covered, he has to name everything he can. Little Hung hardly ever misses naming everything. And he knew the names of all his teachers and classmates the first day."

"He sounds like a most unusual youngster," said Mr. Strang.

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"And polite as they make 'em," added Maggie. "His mother's a doll, too. She walked Hung to school the first day, and they arrived at nine-oh-two. Two minutes late, and she was apologizing all over the place in that broken English of hers. Said she'd stopped off at Howland's Drug Store to buy Hung a little picture book for a birthday surprise. There were a lot of people in the store and it took longer than she expected. Two minutes. Most parents wouldn't have bothered to apologize for being two minutes late."

Mr. Strang was considering the picture again. "Maybe that big circle in the background is the sun," he muttered. "I'll bet this shows some kind of prayer ritual in Vietnam."

Maggie shook her head. "You'd lose, Leonard. First art class of the year, everybody draws something they've seen that day. I haven't changed that first lesson in thirty years."

"Uh huh. I'd love to ask Hung what he saw."

"He won't be able to tell you for a while. He's in the hospital. His tonsils come out tomorrow. A public assistance case, and the Nguyen family is having fits. They're as poor as church mice—the little shack they live in only has a few pieces of furniture in it—but they hate the thought of accepting charity."

"You know, Maggie, this picture fascinates me." Mr. Strang tapped the picture with the end of his pencil. "In all the other drawings in the room, I can make out what the child was trying to do. Okay, so a house looks like a box, and animals are so many sausages tied together. But at least you know what they're supposed to be. But here . . . Trematoda! Didn't the boy say anything about the picture?"

"Well, I couldn't ask him directly what it was a picture of," replied Maggie, "but I did get him to talk a little about that thing down in the corner. The shoebox on wheels or whatever it is."

"Oh? And what did Master Hung have to say about the box?"

"The strangest thing. He told me, 'That's Katie Tennatey.' And then he wouldn't say another word about it."

Mr. Strang's forehead furrowed as he pronounced the strange name to himself. KAY-tee ten-NAY-tee. A name that belonged in a limerick or other comic poetry? A Vietnamese word, perhaps? But it didn't sound oriental.

A high-pitched muttering outside the door signaled that Maggie's next class had arrived. Mr. Strang excused himself, gave the art teacher a peck on the cheek, and walked out into the parking lot.

As he drove onto the street he began composing in his mind the

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talk he would give at the next elementary school. The same basic pattern would be used, of course. Why fiddle with success? Still, certain changes ought to be made in order to—

Katie Tennatey.

The name echoed in Mr. Strang's mind almost as if he'd said it aloud. He shook his head in annoyance. This was no time to be hypothesizing about a child's daydreams. There was work to be done. Now if more stress were put on—

Katie Tennatey.

Mr. Strang's next talk was exceedingly lackluster, and the final one of the day was a distinct failure. While his voice droned on, the far reaches of his brain kept forming pictures of rows of long-eared pumpkins worshiping their great pumpkin god, and of people with black faces loading wheeled crates, each of which had the same strangely rhythmic name.

Katie Tennatey.

The name and the picture connected with it, along with snippets of Maggie's story about Hung Nguyen, "The Mnemonic Kid," kept wriggling into Mr. Strang's consciousness like slippery eels that he couldn't quite grasp. For a reason he couldn't comprehend, his brain would not relinquish its vision of a small boy coming to school with his mother and seeing—what?

Katie Tennatey.

By the time he was ready to go home, Mr. Strang's head was throbbing painfully. He arrived just as his landlady, Mrs. Mackey, was coming up the front walk, her arms loaded with paper bags.

"Gud day t'ye, Muster Strang," she said in a rich, peaty Irish brogue. "Been doin' a bit uv shopping, I have. First to the bank for funds, then next door to the drugstore, where they've a foin sale on toothpaste. Afterward the gracery, and I tell you, the price o' meat is a caution. Finally—"

"Mrs. Mackey, I have a bit of a headache," he told the talkative woman. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll just go up and lie down."

"You do that, you poor thing," cooed Mrs. Mackey. "Some bug ye've caught, mebbe? If you want to stay home tomorrow, I'd be glad to call—"

"No, I'll be fine. I just need some rest, that's all."

Taking the afternoon paper with him, Mr. Strang went upstairs to his room. He stretched out on the bed and thumbed through the day's news. Another political scandal . . . more trouble in the Middle East . . .

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NO PROGRESS IN GORHAM BANK ROBBERY was the headline of a tiny article on Page 12. The teacher snorted his annoyance with the police. He'd followed the case closely in the papers for the past two weeks, hoping that some vital clue would be found, allowing a dramatic recovery of the money.

"Scyphozoa!" he muttered. "Why, if I were one of those detectives, I'd—" And then fatigue overcame him.

Mr. Strang slept. And for one of the few times in his life he dreamed.

In his dreams richly robed oriental priests faced the setting sun. Chanting in high voices, and with arms outstretched, they bowed low to the slanting rays. Meanwhile, dusky-skinned children with sticks for arms and legs played and cavorted near a wheeled crate from which a hollow voice proclaimed, "I am Katie Tennatey!"

The scene shimmered and changed. Three rabbits with long narrow ears sat beneath bell jars on a laboratory table. Two scientists, each wearing a dark surgical mask, were observing the animals. A small cart with *KATIE TENNATEY* stenciled on it stood in a shadowy corner. And illuminating everything was the huge sun. But it wasn't a sun. It was a—

Mr. Strang sat bolt upright in bed. His body was streaming with perspiration, and his eyes were wide as he peered into the darkness. He glanced at the alarm clock. It was 1:45.

He reached for the telephone at his bedside and dialed a number. While the phone was ringing, he whispered a single word to himself.

"Door."

"Paul Roberts speaking," said an exhausted voice at the other end of the line.

"Paul? This is Leonard Strang. I have to see you—now!"

"Mr. Strang, it's the middle of the night." There was more than a hint of anger in the detective's voice. "Can't it wait?"

"No. By morning I might forget some of the details."

"Details? Details about what?"

"I'll tell you when I see you. My place or yours?"

Twenty minutes later Detective Sergeant Paul Roberts was still brushing sleep from his eyes as he admitted the diminutive science teacher into his house. "It's after two, Mr. Strang," Roberts mumbled. "I hope there's a reason for getting me up at this hour."

"Paul, we've worked a number of cases together," said the teacher. "Have I ever let you down?"

"Well, no. But this better be good, that's all I've got to say."

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Mr. Strang told his story. And it was good. Within half an hour of the teacher's entrance Roberts had the coffee pot on to boil and was at the telephone, shouting instructions to his own men as well as to the state police. "That's right, Kilowatt-Tango. Get an APB out right away. Yeah, now!" He slammed the phone down and rubbed his hands gleefully together. "If only they haven't left the state," he muttered.

Two days later there was a small ceremony at Aldershot General Hospital. Grouped around the bed of first-grader Hung Nguyen were the boy's parents as well as Mr. Strang, Paul Roberts, and Maggie Lakmund.

"We got 'em, Mr. Strang," Roberts announced. "They were in a little shack in the mountains upstate. A local cop up there spotted 'em. When the police broke in, they found most of the money. Some of it still had Gorham Savings and Loan bands around it. Open-and-shut case, the D.A. tells me."

"I—do—not—understand." Mr. Nguyen spoke in a halting voice. "You have apparently done some most successful police work. But what has this to do with my son?"

"Hell, your son—oh, excuse me, Mrs. Nguyen—but your son solved the case. He and Mr. Strang, that is."

"Case? What case?" Mr. Nguyen asked.

"The robbery of the Gorham Savings and Loan." Roberts patted Hung on the shoulder. "He gave us the lead we needed."

"But how?" Mr. Nguyen shook his head in confusion.

"Yes, I'd like an answer to that myself," said Maggie.

The detective's grin threatened to split his face in two. "You tell 'em, Mr. Strang," he said. "You're the one who figured the whole thing out."

"Okay, Leonard," said Maggie in an amused voice. "How did you and Hung figure out whodunit? Astound me."

"It was the picture, of course," said Mr. Strang. "Did you bring it along as I asked?"

Maggie withdrew a folded paper from her purse. At the same time the gnomelike science teacher whipped out black-rimmed glasses and put them on. He peered over their tops professorially.

"The bank," he began, "was robbed on the Tuesday after Labor Day. Does that particular day have any other significance, Maggie?"

"Sure. It's the opening day of school. But what—"

"Opening day." Mr. Strang raised a gnarled finger for attention.

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"The very day Mrs. Nguyen walked her son to school. But they were two minutes late getting there. Why was that, Mrs. Nguyen?"

"I stop at store—drugstore."

"The drugstore, I hasten to add," said Mr. Strang, "is next door to the bank, as my landlady reminded me the other day. And why did you go into the drugstore, Mrs. Nguyen?"

"Buy gift—present. For Hung's birthday. A surprise."

Mr. Strang nodded. "And you didn't want Hung at your side while you bought that surprise, did you, Mrs. Nguyen?"

She shook her head. "Hung stayed outside. I tell him to wait quietly. He's good boy. Does as I say."

"Now, Mrs. Nguyen and Hung got to school just after nine o'clock," Mr. Strang told the others. "That had to mean they were at the drugstore before nine. When would you say you did your shopping, Mrs. Nguyen?"

"Oh, maybe eight hours thirty, or eight hours forty-five."

"Hey!" cried Maggie. "That was just about the time the robbery was taking place."

"Ah, you're finally catching on to what it took me hours to discover," Mr. Strang replied. "I had all the facts after I'd seen Hung's picture and heard you tell about him. But what a headache I got while my poor brain tried to make sense of them."

"Sense?" said Maggie. "I still can't make sense of—"

"Think about Hung, out there on the street while his mother's in the drugstore. He wanders about, a trifle bored. Finally, just for something to do, he peeks in a window."

"The bank window?" asked Maggie incredulously. "But the shades were down."

"True. And an adult passing by would notice nothing. But think of those tall windows in the front of the bank. They come down to within two or three feet of the sidewalk. Practically at eye level for a child in first grade. And if the shade hadn't quite been lowered all the way? Why, even an inch of clearance would have given Hung a front-row seat to everything going on inside the bank."

"But if Hung saw the robbery, why didn't he call the police?" Maggie asked. "Or at least let somebody know what was going on?"

"A small boy from a foreign country? Poor enough to be deprived even of the wonders of television? I doubt that Hung even knew there was anything wrong. He just saw some people inside the bank performing an odd ritual."

"Come on, Leonard," Maggie scoffed. "You're just guessing."

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"No, I'm not," Mr. Strang replied. "Look at the picture, Maggie."

She unfolded the paper. "I don't see anything. There's that big circle at the top—probably the sun."

"Maggie, you told me yourself that one should never guess about what a child has been drawing. But this time I'm not guessing. That circle isn't the sun. It's a door."

"Oh, Leonard! Doors aren't circular."

"The vault door in the Gorham Savings and Loan is. And The Mnemonic Kid remembered that. He remembered everything."

Maggie looked at the picture again and her jaw dropped. "I told him to draw something he'd seen that day," she said softly. "It's all there, isn't it?"

"Everything," said Mr. Strang with a smile. "The line across the center of the paper is the counter behind which the tellers stand. Those three circles on the line are the tellers themselves, and the 'ears' going up from them are their raised hands. The domes over them are the windows at which they stand. Probably they had their backs turned as there are no eyes or noses in the picture."

"The stick figures with the circular heads at the bottom have to be the robbers—" Maggie sputtered.

"And the circles themselves are blackened because the robbers were wearing masks," added Mr. Strang.

"But the box on top of the two circles—what's that, Leonard?"

"I suspect that after looking in the bank window, Hung did a little more wandering around. He came to the alley next to the bank. That's when he saw Katie Tennatey."

"But who is she?" asked Maggie in exasperation.

"Why, the getaway car—drawn the way any child might draw an automobile. But this one gave Paul the lead he needed to catch the robbers."

Maggie frowned and shook her head. "I don't get it, Leonard. That box Hung drew might be any car in the world—if it's an automobile at all."

"Ah, but you asked Hung about the box he'd drawn. And he told you what it was. By giving you the label that was attached to it."

"The car had a label on it?"

"Uh huh. And Hung was able to remember the label by a mnemonic trick. He turned what was on it into a name."

"A name? Oh, you mean Katie Tennatey." Maggie again pronounced the name slowly to herself. "KAY-tee ten-NAY-tee."

And then she stared fixedly at the science teacher. A dawning

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awareness widened her eyes, and suddenly her head bobbed up and down in total understanding.

"The license plate," she whispered.

"Exactly—the license plate. Katie Tennatey. Or, more precisely, Kay—Tee—Ten—Eighty. KT-1080."

"And now you know what Mr. Strang told me the other night," Roberts chimed in. "I tried poking holes in his story, but the more I listened, the more it made sense. So I called it in. K-Kilowatt, T-Tango. One—zero—eight—zero. Fortunately, those two hoods hadn't left the state. In under twelve hours we had 'em in custody."

Roberts reached down and patted the shoulder of the boy in the hospital bed. "Young fellow, you and Mr. Strang are probably going to share a nice reward from the bank for your work on this case. What are you going to do with your share? Get a TV? Or a new bike, maybe?"

The small oriental boy beneath the white sheets pointed to his throat and spoke for the first time. In a harsh whisper he said the thing uppermost in his mind.

"Ice cream."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

REALISM?

by LESLIE S. HAUGER

How come the fiction private eye
When hot upon a chase
Never has to drive around
To find a parking space?

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Nat Magee had a long time to plan his revenge . . .

REUNION IN BAINEVILLE

by JOHN C. BOLAND

Nat stopped the truck on the hot dusty road. The girl beside him rocked forward. Her hands were bound behind her, and she had to brace herself with her tennis-shoed feet. Clanging the gears, Nat shifted into reverse and rolled back fifty feet to the turnoff that he had missed. It was a hard-baked, rutted track that hammered the pickup truck's springs. Three-quarters of a mile through the rain-starved scrubland, he reached the house.

He rolled the truck into the grass beside the well. It was the first time in two hours that he wasn't more afraid than the girl appeared to be. Her name was Sandy, and she was the chief of police's seventeen-year-old daughter.

As he swung the car door open on rusted hinges, she looked at him squarely from the dust-streaked seat. She had blue eyes, mousy brown hair, and a little lingering baby fat. Her manner was a severe adult's. "Don't you think this has gone far enough?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her past the steering wheel. She got her feet under her in time to keep from falling.

The last time he had seen Baineville, the girl had been five years old. Her father had been chief deputy and a church deacon. Some people said Earl Stannis used his nightstick too much, but most figured that the boys who got it deserved it. Nat got it just once, when he put up a fuss over a padded bar tab at the Oasis and the owner called for a patrol car. Now the Oasis was the Shanghai, and the strippers cavorted well on the other side of what was legal. And if you believed the gossip, the company that was half owner had a silent partner named Earl Stannis.

Nat believed it. Earl had never been satisfied being on just the city payroll. He knew that first-hand.

The girl winced, and Nat loosened his grip. He tied her to a kitchen chair. He put his revolver on top of the refrigerator. It was an oily

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black .38 that had cost him $200 up in Simpson. He turned on the tap, and a rustry trickle spilled into the iron sink. Dad had talked about getting the well dug deeper. And fixing the barn, and graveling the road.

Hands trembling, Nat dried his face. Imagine that—missing the turnoff! Drunk or sober, he'd driven Baineville Highway since his fourteenth birthday, and even in the middle of the night he'd always known when the turnoff was coming.

When he and Linda had got married, he'd brought her back here, expecting a row with the old man. Instead, they'd taken to each other so well that Nat had felt jealous.

He had just eleven months left at Simpson when the lawyer asked him what to do about the property. Insurance from Blackstock Forge had paid all Dad's bills and left some over. The lawyer said he could get a fair price for the place, though it had run down a lot since Nat last saw it. "Give you a little nest egg when you decide what you want to do," the lawyer said.

When Nat told him to pay the next year's taxes and hold the deed, the lawyer fumbled. "I could get you eleven thousand for it tomorrow morning. That's not choice land, Nathan. And you wouldn't have to come back to Baineville."

"I hear Stannis is chief now," Nat said.

The lawyer was in his sixties. His suit had shiny elbows, and filching from clients was probably the only way he made ends meet. He'd arranged the plea bargain that had kept Nat out of the death house—and had kept him silent about Stannis. The lawyer's watery gray eyes met Nat's without sympathy. "He's out of your league. He proved that with a shotgun eleven years ago."

Nat tucked the revolver into his back pocket and limped out to the barn. He'd got everything ready the night before. The funny thing was how much he had forgotten about the barn. The concrete and stone foundation had slipped from his daydreams long ago. So had the musty smell of stored hay. So had the hot summer dimness and the silent glide of wasps through narrow bands of light. He had remembered only the diseased gray wood and the rats and snakes.

He climbed into the loft. Figuring how to work the chair had taken some time. Finally he had nailed two boards to the bottoms of the legs and then nailed the boards to the floor. The chair faced the edge of the loft. A rope ran from the main door to an overhead beam. It dangled like a quiet O in front of the chair.

When he got back to the kitchen, the girl was on her side on the

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floor. She hadn't made any progress against the bonds. When he set her upright, she was crying. "My father's going to *kill* you!"

"Your daddy's killed a lot of people," Nat said softly. "One more won't matter."

"He kills criminals," she sputtered.

He went to the wall phone and dialed. When he said he was a schoolteacher calling about the girl, the deputy put him through.

"Howdy, Earl," Nat said, leaning against the wall, watching the hope on the girl's face with a detached pity. "You may want to make sure this line is private."

"Who is this?"

"You know. It's Nat Magee."

"Yeah, I saw you on Campbell Street. You got fat in prison."

"I got something else, Earl. I got your little girl."

"You—"

"Watched you drive out of that big fancy house this morning. I heard your wife died. So I went in and found that old Mexican woman and Sandy. Isabella wanted to brain me with a frying pan."

"I'll kill you."

"I've been half dead for twelve years. You did that. Then prison took another quarter. So there isn't much left. What you ought to be thinking about is how to keep me from cutting your girl's throat."

Stannis swore incoherently.

"What you ought to do, Earl, is listen up. I got a deal. You come after her alone, and I won't harm a hair. Come right now. I'm at the old place. Just me and Sandy. You come alone, get by me, and she's yours. That's a better deal than you gave me."

"I should have killed you at the warehouse."

"That's right. After what you did, you should have killed me."

"Suppose I don't come alone?"

"Well, I'm going up in the attic right now and watch the road. If I see more than one car, or more than one ugly cop, I'll come back down and slice her. I don't think you got time to organize anything, but I'll be listening on the police band."

Nat stepped over to the girl and put the receiver against her cheek. "Say something to your pa."

She lurched against it, as if the telephone line offered safety. "Daddy! He's got me tied up. He's crazy. Daddy?"

Nat jerked the phone away. "You come alone, Earl, and come fast. It shouldn't take you more than twenty minutes."

"Traffic—"

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Nat hung up.

Sandy Stannis glared at him. Indignation overcame her fear. "He'll get you. You're crazy to think you can get away with this."

"I know what I can get away with. I had a long time to plan. When your ma died, I figured it wrecked eight years of thinking." He added silently: Then I remembered that Earl had a daughter.

He wiped his mouth, as if he'd said something dirty. He wanted to leave Stannis nothing, not even the girl's love and admiration. But he hated the sound of his voice, laced with the wheedling self-pity that seemed second nature to cons.

Telling her was part of it, part of the plan. You know who your daddy killed? But he found that he couldn't. She could keep her illusions.

She said, "You planned all this because my father sent you to prison?" The angry blue eyes found it intolerable.

Nat sighed. "Come on, we've got to get ready."

He untied her feet and loosed her from the chair. His spine ached as they walked to the barn, and his limp was so bad that he could barely climb the ladder. He forced the girl to go up ahead of him. She stood at the top of the ladder, her hands tied, her feet free, and debated briefly whether to kick the wheezing man in the face. When he waved her back, she retreated.

He stood in the dimness, in the smell of heat and rot, and took her arm. He undid her hands, then lashed her arms flat against her sides so she couldn't use them for balance. He gagged her with an old red handkerchief, cut a short hank of rope, and bound her ankles.

Puffing, he carried her over to the edge of the loft. She was lighter than Linda. He remembered, couldn't forget. He stood her shivering on the precipice, then guided her into the chair. The overhead beam was five feet in front of him, and he had to use a pitchfork to snag the dangling noose. He had measured everything last night.

The noose slid over the mousy hair and fit snug against her neck. Only a few inches of arc drooped as the rope stretched up to the beam, then fell from the opposite side. The end was tied firmly around a tool hook on the ancient door. If the door opened more than six inches, the rope would transmit a lethal jerk.

He put a hand on her shoulder.

"You sit real still." He avoided the round eyes and said, "Your daddy's coming."

He left her staring into light-streaked space. He had found the two loose boards at the back of the barn and finished worrying them

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free last night. Now he removed them, lumbered down the ladder, stepped into the light, and returned the boards.

It had taken him longer than he had expected.

Trailing dust, the unmarked police car rolled into the yard. Nat ran to the side of the barn and fired a shot into the sun-washed windshield. The car kept rolling, its speed steady, past his pickup truck, through a stretch of dry grass. It hit the front porch, knocking down the left post, and a corner of the tar-papered roof folded down onto the hood. The engine chattered and died.

Frowning, Nat limped to the car. As he had expected, the driver's seat was empty.

He started to turn when agony flashed through his right elbow. The impact flung him against the car. He pawed with his left hand to keep from falling, as the echo of the gunshot faded. He managed to swivel his head and see Earl Stannis striding out of the brush. A heavy revolver wavered hardly at all as Stannis walked.

In twelve years Stannis had put on weight, too. His hair had grayed at the temples, and he had stepped up to a striped suit that looked as good as the mayor's. He pointed the gun at Nat's chest. "You always were a sucker, Nat. You shouldn't have come back."

"You shouldn't have bushwhacked us at the warehouse."

Stannis raised an eyebrow. "When a policeman interrupts a burglary, it isn't bushwhacking."

"It is when he was getting paid to protect the job."

Stannis shrugged. "You're still crying, a whiner. Al Finch paid me more. That's why he's mayor and all your friends are dead. I should have killed you that night. With your boss Willy and his top boys dead, Al had a clear field. But I should have made sure about you, too."

"How did it feel, knowing you'd shot a woman?"

"You mean that slut from the Oasis? Your little Linda? Only bad thing was that she got most of the buckshot instead of you. You thought taking her on a job would be a kick, right?"

He was reliving old times, Nat thought, to avoid the present. Earl Stannis glanced at the windows of the old house, as if they could answer what was on his mind. "What did you do to Sandy?"

"Nothing. You're the killer, Earl."

"Where is she?"

"In the barn. But Earl—"

Stannis shot Nat through the head.

He ran and pushed open the barn door.

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a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA WILLIAMSON

A delicately woven story that one of our editors found "spooky" . . . "I thought I heard something just now. I thought it was . . . a cat."

SHADOWS IN THE ATTIC

by BARBARA WILLIAMSON

Again that morning, several times, he said, "I'm sorry, Netta."

"I know you are, Brother," she said and tried to go about her business.

The house was large and needed her daily attention. There were the tall rooms downstairs, the bedrooms on the second floor, and, at the top of the house, under the trees, the attic. The attic was much on her mind today.

He followed her from room to room, insisting. She did understand, didn't she? He was very sorry.

"Don't be silly, Brother," she said.

His name was John Clayton, but she'd called him Brother from the day of his birth, now more than seventy years ago. She could still remember standing on tiptoe, looking down at him, small and wriggling in his crib. Like a grub, she said, and was promptly banished from the room.

"It must have been the wine," John Clayton said, and then, again, "I'm sorry, Netta."

Hoping to hush him up, she made salmon croquettes for lunch, adding a little cheese because he liked them that way.

"You're good to me, Netta. I don't deserve it."

"Don't be silly, Brother."

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In the early afternoon John Clayton said that he might work on his postage stamps for a while.

"Don't overdo yourself, Brother. Remember your heart."

"It isn't a *condition*, Netta. Merely an irregular beat. I'm perfectly fine. The stamps are good for my nerves. The doctor said so."

"Very well, Brother. Have you washed your hands?"

He assured her that he had. He started out of the room, then turned. "What will you do, Netta?"

"After the dishes? Oh, the mending, I suppose. And I want to look for that crochet pattern of Mama's that Cousin May wrote about. Then there's the dusting."

"Is it the day for dusting?"

"No, but I like to tidy up extra now and then."

John Clayton's hand went to his mouth, a signature of anxiety. "You work too hard, Netta."

It was true. There had been no servants in the house for more than thirty years. But she loved her home. She had never left it for more than two weeks in all her long life.

"Go on and do your stamps, Brother."

"Yes. Yes, I will."

He turned, then quickly turned again, like something on a weather clock. "I'm sorry, Netta. I'm sorry about Mr. Phipps."

"Of course you are, Brother."

The parlor was dim and cool despite the summer day burning beyond its windows. She circled the room with her duster and cloth. A light touch here, a heavier one there. The pie-crust tables. The old pendulum clock on the mantel. A lamp globe, rosy and delicate.

"Netta?"

She did not have to turn her head to know that he stood tentatively in the doorway to the hall, his hand to his mouth.

"Yes, Brother?"

"I thought I heard something just now. I thought it was . . . a cat."

She replaced the lamp globe carefully, then turned to look at him. "*Cat?* In this house? There hasn't been a cat here since old Tiger. You know that."

The fingers covering his lips twitched a little. "Please," he said. "Don't talk about old Tiger, Netta."

She stared at him for a long moment, then gave a shrug and returned to her dusting. "I suppose there could be a stray cat

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around," she said. "When I finish here I'll go out and look, if you'll feel better about it."

"Would you please, Netta? I'd appreciate it. Cats . . ."

She held a cut-glass candy dish up to the light. "I know how you feel about cats, Brother. Ever since old Tiger."

"I can't help it, Netta," John Clayton said. "I really can't help it."

"Of course not. No one said you could."

Her fingers were caressing the family Bible, her cloth gently brushing its gilt edges. "Why don't you read a while? One of Papa's books. You always enjoy that."

John Clayton brightened. "I believe I will. Papa favored Trollope, but I like Dickens best. Such *satisfying* words. They don't write books like that any more, Netta."

"No," she said, returning the Bible to its proper place.

There was a moment's silence, then John Clayton cleared his throat. "You will see about the cat, won't you, Netta?"

She didn't look at him. She was pursuing the thread of a cobweb behind one of the big chairs.

"Yes, Brother. I told you I would."

"Thank you, Netta."

She squashed a spider fleeing for its life.

"You're welcome, Brother."

Certain shadows never left the attic. Even the light from the ceiling bulb and the lone window could not dispel them entirely. Pushed into corners and behind trunks of old clothes and barricades of cast-off furniture, the shadows lay unmoving on the floor, dark as cave water.

Netta was on her knees beside an open trunk. Old lace scratched her fingers and black velvet made its own dust as she touched it. For some time she had heard sounds in the house below. Then, inevitably, came footsteps on the attic stairs. A light scampering. Mouse-like steps.

"Netta?"

"Yes, Brother?" Tissue paper crinkled drily in her hands.

"I've been looking for you. Didn't you hear me call?"

"I don't like to shout, Brother. I knew you'd find me. You always do."

He stepped warily into the room. A cracked mirror leaning against the far wall caught his reflection and broke it into pieces.

"What are you doing up here, Netta?"

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"I told you. Sometimes I think you don't listen to me any more. I want to find the crochet pattern of Mama's that Cousin May wants. The peony one. You remember. Like the dresser scarf in the company bedroom."

"Do you have to look now, Netta? While I was reading I had this *splendid* idea. Netta . . . let's have a dinner party."

She rose to her feet slowly and turned to him. Her hands were filled with thin strips of yellowed paper. "Dinner party? That's silly. We don't know anyone to ask to a dinner party."

"What about Mama's old friends in town? And Papa's business—"

"Don't be a goose, Brother." She closed the trunk lid with a thump. Dust motes rose frenziedly in the pale light. "Mama and Papa's friends have been dead for years and we never had any."

"That's not true, Netta. There's Reverend Marsh at the church. And the doctor. Dr. Simms. They could bring their wives. And we could ask Mr. Phipps."

Netta's hands were perfectly still for an instant, then they moved again, flipping through the patterns. "He wouldn't come, Brother."

John Clayton's eyes danced and his hands fluttered in the air. "Oh, but he would, Netta. I'm sure he would."

She looked up then. "No."

His eyes fell before hers and she returned to the patterns in her hands, sorting them without hurry.

John Clayton moved his feet a little, then pulled at his lip. After a moment he said, "You liked Mr. Phipps, didn't you, Netta?"

She put the patterns aside, then moved to another of the trunks, raising its lid. A musty smell floated out like a ghost.

"He was pleasant company," she said, "and he was kind enough to bring us the things we needed from his store."

"I thought maybe he . . . was courting you, Netta."

She thought of Mr. Phipps. His strong, straight back. His thick white hair. "Did you, Brother? That was silly of you."

She began to search the trunk. A shawl, heavily embroidered. Baby clothes, yellowed and stiff with age. A tiny blue bonnet. John Clayton had worn it on outings in his carriage. "What a *pretty* baby!" people had said while she watched from behind her mother's skirt.

"I'm sorry about Mr. Phipps, Netta."

"Yes, Brother. You've told me."

"But I'm not sure you understand. I only meant to be hospitable. When he came and you had gone to the cemetery with the flowers, I asked him in for a glass of wine. I never meant to tell him all those

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things. But then when he didn't come again afterwards and I told you—"

"Never mind."

A blue blanket, stained and spotted with years, came into her hands. She pushed it down to the bottom of the trunk.

"But, Netta, I never said that Mama was—"

Her head shot up as if from water.

"Don't use that word, Brother. Mama went to River Rest because of her *nerves*. She always had bad nerves. Just like you. And when she died there after all that long time, Papa was sick with grief. He was *sick*, Brother. The whiskey helped him sleep. You know that."

John Clayton's hand hid his mouth completely. "I know, Netta. I know."

"Then let's hear no more about it. Or Mr. Phipps, either. What's done is done."

"Yes, Netta."

She pulled a box of patterns from the trunk. John Clayton watched her, not moving. Even his fingers against his mouth were still.

Outside, among the trees, a July fly screamed.

John Clayton started and looked toward the window. "I hate those things," he said, "I always have hated flies."

Netta did not look up from her search. "You should be more compassionate, Brother. That creature has such a short life. It may be dead before morning."

She riffled through the yellowed patterns. Now and then a corner crumbled at her touch. The fly's shrilling faded and ceased.

John Clayton said, "Maybe I'll take a little walk."

"Oh, you don't want to do that, Brother. It's much too hot."

John Clayton moved his feet, a soft, dusty shuffle that scarcely broke the silence.

"Why don't you take a nap? It might do you good. You look a little tired."

John Clayton touched his mouth. "Yes, I am, Netta. Just a bit. My eyes, you know. From the stamps. And reading Papa's book."

"I know, Brother. You always had weak eyes. Just like Mama." She dropped the patterns back into their box.

"Netta?"

"Yes?"

"Did you look for the cat?"

She lowered the trunk lid and reached for a hat box tied with a rusty black ribbon.

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"There's no cat, Brother."
"You're sure?"
"Yes, I'm sure."
"Thank you, Netta."
"You're welcome, Brother. Don't I always look after you?"

On summer days just after the sun dropped behind the trees, the light on the porch became green and uncertain, like the light inside a bottle. Netta felt that if she tried, she could rest against it, drifting, dreaming perhaps.

She sat in the old swing and let the light lap against her folded hands. It still surprised her sometimes to look down and see the age spots marring her skin. Not so long ago, surely, the green evening light had washed firm young flesh.

The wicker chair nearby crackled and John Clayton said, "You're quiet tonight, Netta. I hope you're not brooding. It's not good to brood."

"No, Brother."

Beyond the trees and the front yard was a road, and farther up that road, more houses, a web of streets, the town itself. Lights would be coming on in the houses, children's outdoor games ending, husbands coming home for supper. The streets would cool slowly, turning blue in the twilight. Then it would be time for things that wake with the dark.

"Netta?"
"Yes, Brother?"
"I'm sorry about Mr. Phipps."

She turned her head to look at him. Seated in the big wicker chair, he looked small and rubbery, like a child's toy, something that would squeal outrageously if pressed in the middle, a comic thing with a tiny pursed mouth and thin streaks of painted white hair.

"I wasn't thinking about that, Brother. I was remembering old times. When Mama and Papa were alive. And old Tiger."

John Clayton's hand went to his mouth.

"Please, Netta."

"What, Brother? Do take your hand down. You know I can't hear you when you mumble that way."

His hand dropped. "I'm sorry, Netta."

"That's better. Now what were you saying?"

"I said please don't go on about old Tiger. I couldn't help it, Netta. He hated me."

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"Oh, tosh." She looked away from him. "Cats don't hate. They're dumb animals."

"But he *scratched* me, Netta. And Mama said he wasn't safe to have around the house."

The light was darkening. The trees were black now against the dimming sky.

"I'm sure they found him a good home, Netta."

"No, not old Tiger. He was too wild. Nobody wanted him, but me. No. They put him in a sack and threw him in the river."

"No, Netta." John Clayton pulled at his lip. "They wouldn't do that."

"Yes. It took him a long time to drown, I expect. A big strong cat like that. He'd fight. I used to hope that he got loose somehow and he'd come back." She looked out among the trees. "Through the trees. All wet and dripping from the river."

"Don't, Netta. Don't talk that way."

She turned to him again. The green light on his face gave him the look of mortal illness.

"You thought he might come back, too, didn't you, Brother? You always covered your ears when I brought you down here after Mama and Papa were asleep and called to old Tiger. Remember? */Tiger! Tiger! burning bright/ In the forests of the night . . ./* Remember?"

The chair was crackling with alarm.

"Netta, please. That upsets me. Please don't say that again."

"I was only reminiscing, Brother."

"But it upsets me, Netta. Please."

The light on the porch was emerald now and steady. Soon the darkness would claim it altogether. Netta folded her hands in her lap again and looked down at them, pale splotches against her skirt.

"Forget about old Tiger, Brother. He won't come back now. He's years dead. Like Mama and Papa."

"Yes, Netta. I know."

"The dead don't come back till Judgment Day."

"I know that, Netta. But don't talk about it. Please."

"All right, Brother. Whatever you say."

"Thank you, Netta."

She looked back toward the trees, into total dark. After a while, from behind his hand, John Clayton said, "I'm sorry, Netta."

Just before the moon rose that night, she returned to the porch

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and stood on the steps for a time, listening to the crickets in the grass and the deep-voiced frogs down by the river.

She heard him when he came to the screen door behind her, even before his form partially blocked the light from the hall.

"Netta?"

"Yes, Brother?"

"What are you doing out there?"

"Nothing. Just getting a breath of air."

"Did you hear something? It's not that cat, is it?"

She turned. He was a dark blot against the screen.

"No. There's no cat. I told you."

Out across what once was a cotton field, the moon began to appear. Soon its pale glow would be painting the walls of the old house.

"I'm very tired, Netta," John Clayton said. "I think I'll go to bed now."

She walked to the door and peered at him through the screen. "Maybe you should, Brother. You don't look well. I expect you did too much today. The stamps and then Papa's book. Would you like a glass of buttermilk? It's icy cold now."

"No. Thank you, Netta."

He stepped back into the hall as she opened the door. The light was a soft yellow radiance surrounding him. He put his hand to his mouth.

"You're good to me, Netta."

"Don't be silly. Aren't you my brother?"

"You mustn't work so hard any more, Netta. You mustn't do things like that . . . work in the attic. It's not good for you."

"Nonsense. It was a favor for Cousin May."

"But all those old things . . . memories . . . Did you find the pattern?"

"I found what I wanted, Brother. Now run along to bed and have a good sleep."

"Yes. Yes, I will. Good night, Netta."

She stood just inside the lighted hall, but she could still feel the darkness behind her. It lay across her back, warm and familiar as a hand.

"Brother," she said.

At the foot of the stairs he turned, hand to mouth, a small figure, hardly taller than a boy.

"Yes, Netta?"

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"I left the light in your room on low the way you like it. I want you to be comfortable."

"Thank you, Netta."

He turned.

"And Brother?"

One small neat foot was on the first step. He looked over his shoulder. "Yes, Netta?"

"I turned your bed down, too."

There were few people at the funeral and only Cousin May stayed at the house afterward.

"You shouldn't be alone right now, Netta. I'll keep you company for a few days, if you like."

"That's good of you, Cousin May. The house does seem empty now."

Cousin May wagged her head sadly. "Poor little fellow. He was such a *sweet* baby. Remember?"

Netta looked down at her hands. "Yes. I remember."

Cousin May dabbed at her eyes. She was a lumpy little woman, yellow and shriveled as a winter apple. "I'm glad he never knew how bad his heart really was. He would have fretted himself into an even earlier grave."

"Yes," Netta said. "The doctor thought it best. Brother's nerves were so bad. But I took care of him, Cousin May."

Cousin May patted her hand. "Dear Netta. Of course you took care of him. Now you're not to worry about the house. I'll tidy things up for you."

"No, thank you, Cousin May. I need to keep busy."

"Then I'll help," Cousin May said in her brisk, roll-up-the-sleeves voice. "Maybe we'll run across that pattern I like so much."

"Maybe we will," Netta said.

They cleaned the downstairs, then after a bite of lunch Cousin May said that John Clayton's room should be done right away. "Believe me, Netta. It's less painful now than it will be later. I remember when Grandmamma passed—"

"Very well, Cousin May," Netta said. "I expect you're right."

The room was closed and dim. The massive old furniture loomed at them elephant-like in the gray light.

"Stuffy," Cousin May announced and went to pull back the curtains and raise the windows. She turned, then started, staring at the bed.

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"Good heavens, Netta! What's *that?*"

Netta crossed the room to the bed and looked down.

"This? Oh, this was Mama's."

She held it up, admiring it. "I thought it might still be worth something and I brought it down from the attic for Brother to look at."

"Oh," Cousin May said and, broom in hand, returned to business. "For a minute I thought it was a cat, curled up like that."

Netta turned the red fox fur in her hands until she was looking into its small wizened face. "Now that you mention it," she said, "it does look a little bit like old Tiger."

DETECTIVERSE

BRIEF CASE

by LOLA STRONG JANES

I went to court today and learned
a lot.
The thing the lawyer called a brief
was not.

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Have you noticed how music, as an incidental background, as a kind of leitmotiv, has been creeping more and more often into contemporary murder stories? Music and murder—a strange combo, especially in a semi-tough private-eye story . . .

BLACKMAIL BOOGIE

by J. M. KELLY

I'd rather squeeze off a fast chorus from my alto saxophone than a round from my Smith & Wesson .38 any day. But frankly I can play a mean tune on either instrument.

One Wednesday noon I was sitting in on a lunch-hour jam session. Just a group of amateurs of the three-piece-suit persuasion who get together to swing through some old standards. My office was around the corner over a peepshow parlor on Forty-second Street and I often wander down to keep my lips limber. And some of those businessmen can really blow, too, believe me.

We'd just finished a rendition of "Take the A Train," with yours truly throwing in a few scorching riffs on the Johnny Hodges solo. The boys were putting away their instruments and readjusting their ties. The man who approached me was a trombone player. His eyes, his hair, and his tailor-made suit were all the same shade of gray. He offered me a cigarette and complimented me on my playing. I thanked him. Then he introduced himself as Arthur Skinner. I said I was Elmo DuPre.

"I understand you're a private investigator, Mr. DuPre."

"It's just a hobby," I answered. A couple of question marks appeared in his eyes. "This is my real profession," I said, pointing to my horn. "But it doesn't pay the rent, so I have to do some gumshoeing in my spare time."

He smiled like a guy who doesn't get a chance to smile too often. "I might have some work for you, if you're interested. I was wondering if you could stop by my office this afternoon to discuss it."

I gave it some thought. I had a busy afternoon lined up going over

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racing results and trying to balance my checking account. "I think I can squeeze it in. What kind of job is it?"

"I'd rather talk about that in private. Say three o'clock?" He handed me a business card with raised lettering. The address was an office building three blocks away. I told him I'd see him then. He picked up his trombone and walked away.

I didn't have much time, but I managed to make a few phone calls and find out a little about him before the appointment. He was a partner in a company called Skinner and Thompson, Inc. The firm was one of the more influential real-estate development concerns in the city. They owned, managed, brokered, and traded everything from office buildings to hot-dog stands. It was a business of making deals and it called for good horse sense and solid connections in City Hall. Skinner was supposed to have a lot of both.

I took the elevator up to the fifty-first floor of an antiseptic office tower on Sixth Avenue. The receptionist flashed an orthodontist's dream in my direction, but her eyes went over my black leather jacket, denim jeans, and gold earring with a look that made me feel as if I'd just spit on the floor in church. We went through the "May I help you" rigmarole and she buzzed Skinner to tell him I was there. He came out and shook my hand. As we walked along a corridor to his office we encountered a tall rangy man with the distracted air of a college professor. Skinner introduced him to me as Percy Thompson, his partner. He threw me a dark look. We moved on.

Skinner's office was furnished with a spectacular view of the New Jersey swamps and a desk a little smaller than a Sherman tank. "Mr. DuPre, sit down. Let me be direct with you, we haven't much time. Are you carrying a gun?"

I said I was.

"I'll explain my problem. I have to deliver some money, quite a lot of money. I've just learned that the transaction is to take place this afternoon at five thirty. I would like you to accompany me, at a distance. I don't expect trouble but I would prefer to have some protection, just in case."

"Blackmail?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's not an anniversary gift for your wife, is it?"

"I can't reveal any more about this affair, it's rather delicate."

"It never pays, you know."

"What?"

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"Giving in to blackmailers. It just proves you're a soft touch. They'll keep chipping away at you until you're drained dry."

"Not in this case."

"So it is blackmail."

"Mr. DuPre, I've told you I can't discuss this business with you in any greater detail. Do you want the job or not?"

"Not."

He didn't quite know what to do with his face. He was a tough character but was a little out of his element.

"And I'll tell you why, Mr. Skinner. Did you ever walk into a pitch-black room and knock your shin against a coffee table? It hurts. If you'd known the layout of that room, you might have been more careful. You want me to walk into a situation where gunplay might be involved not knowing the first things about the setup. No, thanks. As I said, this is just a hobby with me."

He chewed that over while I lit a cigarette and admired the view.

"Okay," he said, "but you've got to promise that what I tell you never leaves this room."

"Hope to die."

"Have you heard of the new waterfront project that's being planned over on the river?"

"With the federal grants and all?"

"Yes. Skinner and Thompson is in line for a major role in that project, as prime contractor and managing agent. If we get the award, it will mean literally millions of dollars in business for the firm. Owing to certain reverses we've experienced lately, this business could make or break the company. I feel confident, however, that our proposals will be accepted."

"But . . ." He seemed eager to get the matter off his chest.

"But a difficulty has arisen. As you might imagine, a good deal of politics is involved in a decision of this kind. The negotiations are very delicate and our rivals will use any scrap of information to their advantage. I recently received a letter which offered what were termed 'public relations services' for a fee of $60,000 cash, half now, half on the morning that the award will be announced, if it is in our favor. The letter clearly hinted that if these 'services' were not purchased, information which would effectively eliminate us from consideration for the project would be leaked to the chairman of the state commission."

"What information?"

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His face sagged a fraction of an inch. "Have you heard of Rudy Layton, Mr. DuPre?"

I nodded. Layton was a racketeer who'd had an iron grip on the lower West Side for years. Protection, pinball, and after-hours clubs were his specialties.

"Three years ago my daughter Doreen married Layton. She was just out of college and rather strong-willed. Thankfully, the marriage was kept very confidential. It lasted six months. During that period our firm developed a severe capital shortage. Layton, through Doreen, offered to invest in the company. We had little choice but to accept. If that connection is revealed, our chances of winning this contract will be nil. But once the papers are signed, we will be able to obtain financial backing to buy Layton out."

"Who do you think is behind the threat?"

"I'm not sure. I strongly suspect Layton himself. He's a man with few scruples."

"What about Doreen?"

"I brought up my daughter to be honest, Mr. DuPre. We don't see eye to eye on many things, but I have faith in her integrity."

"But whoever it is, you think it's worth sixty gees to keep them quiet?"

"I look on the money as an investment which will have a large return, nothing more. You see, both Percy Thompson and I have come up in this business along a hard road and from less than affluent beginnings. Now we have a chance to move into an established and secure position in the industry. I can't let that chance go down the drain. For his sake, or mine."

"What's the arrangement for the payoff?"

"I received a call just after I returned. I'm to take the money, in medium-sized bills, to a certain phone booth in Grand Central. I will receive a call there which will explain how to proceed further."

I told him I'd pick him up right outside his office, that he shouldn't look for me but I'd be there. If he saw any trouble brewing he was to pull his handkerchief out of his lapel pocket. That would be my signal to move in.

"And one thing more, Mr. Skinner."

"What is it?"

"When you hit that high C in the fourth bar of 'Perdido,' try sliding up to it rather than marching step by step. It gives it a nice effect." I winked. He nodded gravely, but I thought I saw some of the tension go out of his face. We shook hands and parted . . .

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Approximately two hundred thousand people pass through Grand Central Terminal every day. During the rush hour, the station is a human stew, a vast whirlpool of bodies hurrying through the last grim ritual of the work day.

Skinner made his way through the crowd to the phone booth he wanted. I hung back where I could just keep him in sight. He had a package in his hand, wrapped in brown paper. It could easily have been a book. We waited. I didn't hear the phone ring, but I saw Skinner reach for the receiver and listen for about two minutes. He spoke a few words and hung up. I stepped back behind a pillar. I knew he'd look for me and I didn't want him to give any sign of recognition.

He headed directly for a station exit. Before he reached the door I'd picked up the guy who was tailing him. A real amateur. He did everything he could to look inconspicuous, but he stood out like a gorilla in a chorus line.

I forgot about Skinner and drifted along behind this guy. He was a short wiry character with a two-dollar haircut and a plaid suit tailored to fit a TV antenna.

The three of us took a tour around the block and re-entered the station. Skinner went directly to a hamburger joint off the waiting room and ordered a frank. The little guy drifted over to a newsstand and pretended to examine the magazines. I passed by him and followed Skinner into the grill. I bought a black coffee and took a place at a stand-up table next to the one where Skinner was nibbling his hot dog.

The wiry guy couldn't have been more nervous. His eyes darted around like Mexican jumping beans, occasionally peeking at Skinner.

Finally he came shuffling in. He bought an apple turnover and moved in right beside Skinner. Skinner looked at him and he nodded. He said two words which were probably some kind of code. Skinner already had the package on the table. He slid it over. Plaid Suit picked it up casually, took a bite of his pastry, wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, and turned to walk out.

Because he was so intent on the package of money and had his back to the entrance, the little guy didn't notice the two men hanging around out front. I did. They were relaxed and unobtrusive but I saw them making signs to each other in the language of shifting eyes and nodding chins. When Plaid Suit strolled out of the place with the package tucked under his arm, they fell in behind him. I

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left my coffee unfinished and followed. Before I was out the door I heard a brief syncopated burst of gunfire.

The two hoods had already disappeared into the crowd by the time I was around the corner. It's a kind of sleight of hand, a hit in a crowd like that. You've already fired and stashed your piece before anybody really knows what's going on. Then attention is focused on the body while you nonchalantly mix with the crowd. And if anyone actually sees you with a gun in your hand, they're more likely to dive for cover than to grab you. By the time the cops arrive there are fifty people with fifty different stories ready about what happened and you're already in a cab headed for Brooklyn. Neat.

One of the slugs was a head shot and the gore was keeping people back from the pile of plaid laundry stretched out on the granite floor. I pushed through and knelt down to check for the pulse that wasn't there. I also laid my hand discreetly on the brown-paper package beside the body. I took hold of it as I jumped up, shouted something about calling an ambulance, and walked quickly away.

Skinner was still standing outside the burger joint looking confused. I grabbed his arm and hurried him around the corner to a quiet bar I knew. We both ordered double Scotches and moved to a booth in the rear.

Skinner was shaken. He was a businessman and he liked things plain and simple. He thought he was just making an investment. He didn't like all this complication. I questioned him for about ten minutes to make sure he'd told me everything relevant. He said he'd never seen the guy in the plaid suit before, he couldn't imagine why he would have been killed. And yes, he did want me to dig into the matter—as quietly as possible. He was thoroughly frightened by the turn of events.

I made him give me some addresses and phone numbers and told him to have the blackmail letter sent to my office. Then he started to get up to leave.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Mr. Skinner?" I laid the package in front of him. He started to reach for it, then jerked his hand back. I could see why. One corner was smeared with drying blood. He swallowed hard, picked it up, and walked out.

A couple hours later I was downtown in a supper club that had seen better days. The lights were low enough to hide the fact that the floor hadn't been swept. The air was tinged with cigar smoke. A lean-faced man was sitting at a baby grand in the corner, strolling

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through a Cole Porter medley that was both humorous and melodic. Nobody smiled. Nobody was even listening.

Doreen Skinner knew how to sit on a bar stool with class. I recognized her immediately. She had her father's gray eyes, hard expression, and no-nonsense manner. I'd telephoned her earlier and she'd suggested we meet here. I sat beside her and introduced myself. She bought me a drink and we moved to a table.

"Nice place," I observed.

"It's a joint, but it's quiet, sort of homey," she said. She lit a cigarette, shook out the match, and exhaled a stream of smoke through her nostrils. She looked older than someone who's just three or four years out of college. She was one of those women who are remarkably attractive without being pretty. "You said my father sent you?"

"I said I was working for him. I thought you might be able to help me with a problem that's come up." I explained about the blackmail, but not the reason for it. I told her about the payoff and the murder. She listened hard but didn't betray any emotion.

"And you think I had something to do with it?"

"Did you?"

"No. I wouldn't take money from my father, from Rudy Layton, from anybody, even if they offered it to me."

"I didn't mention Layton."

"That's right, you didn't. But I'll tell you something. I bet I know what that blackmail letter said. The waterfront deal, right? I got a letter, too. Last week. It said I should have $5000 ready to hand over to save Daddy's interest in the project or else the right people would find out about me and Rudy."

"What did you do?"

"I told Rudy about it."

"And?"

"He said it would be taken care of. I never heard any more about it."

"You and Rudy are still friends, then?"

"Sure. I still like the guy. I just couldn't stand being married to him."

"Do you care that a man was killed this afternoon?"

"Should I?"

"Some might."

"Well, I'm not some. I'm not my father. He hires a guy like you with a license and a nice physique to handle it for him, all legit, all

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on the up and up. Me, I don't take getting pushed around by anybody."

"You come on pretty strong."

She laughed. "I was married to a gangster, remember?"

"Maybe you could do me a favor. I want to meet Layton. Tonight. I understand he's a hard man to see. Maybe you could put in a word. For your father's sake. He's in a pretty tight spot."

She thought that over and agreed. I waited while she made a phone call. She came back and gave me an address on the upper East Side. I thanked her. As I left, the piano man was easing into a melancholy version of "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off."

Rudy Layton lived in a high rise in the silk-stocking district. He was a classy thug. The doorman gave me the glass eye as I walked in, but when I said Layton was expecting me he cringed ever so slightly.

I rang Layton's bell and felt myself being inspected through a peephole. His butler opened up and asked me to come in. Not your ordinary butler, of course, but an eighth of a ton of rock-hard muscle with a noticeable scar running from his right ear to the corner of his mouth.

Layton appeared dressed in the kind of smoking jacket leading men used to wear in the '40s. He had black hair combed straight back and tiny agate eyes set deep in their sockets. A foot-long cigarette holder would have completed the picture, but he didn't use one.

He shook my hand and led me into a large living room full of plush earth-tone furniture. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows the shimmering phantasmagoria of the city at night was visible as far as you could see. Layton poured some very smooth Scotch into a pair of crystal old-fashioned glasses. We drank.

"Now, what's on your mind, Mr. DuPre?"

"Murder."

"Murder? Not a very nice topic. Wasn't it De Quincey who said that if a man once indulges in murder he will soon think little of robbery, and then may proceed to drinking and swearing, and even procrastination?"

I didn't even smile. "Let me propose a theory to you, Mr. Layton, just to get your opinion. Let's say your former father-in-law, Arthur Skinner, was involved in some delicate negotiations over a very large real-estate deal. Say you were aware that if your marriage with his daughter were disclosed, it would destroy that deal. Maybe

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you'd see a chance to cash in on these facts. Maybe the guy you'd hire to collect, not knowing that you and your ex-wife were still friends, would see a chance to squeeze a little extra bonus for himself. Maybe that trick would land him on a stone slab in the morgue."

"That's a pocketful of maybe's, DuPre. Now I'll tell you why your theory holds water like a catcher's mask. First, I'm a businessman. One of my investments, as you are obviously aware, is in Skinner and Thompson. Why would I threaten to blow a big deal for them? Secondly, if there were any chance that I would try that, nobody who works for me would even consider pulling the kind of stunt you're talking about. And finally, what you are referring to amounts to extortion. Extortion is illegal. It's a crime. And I'm no criminal." He leaned forward and spit out these last words with a conviction that almost made me laugh.

"Save that line for the jury, Layton. What I need to know to protect my client is who was behind the blackmail. If it was you"—I held up my hand to keep him from interrupting—"I said *if*, then you've dug yourself a deep hole. If it wasn't, if you perhaps didn't even know that Skinner was being blackmailed along with his daughter, then you're still in an uncomfortable position. You're tied to it through her. I don't have to go to the cops based on what I know, and it wouldn't be in my client's interest if I did. But I think you can see that it's in your interest to help me put a lid on this thing quickly. You need the publicity even less than Skinner does."

He stood and walked over to the window, his hands clasped behind his back. He rocked on his heels for a minute, then turned. "What kind of assistance were you looking for?"

"To start, I want to know who the guy was in the plaid suit. Not just his name but who he worked for, how he was connected. From there I'll have to see where it goes."

He thought about it. "I'll tell you something funny, DuPre. I like Arthur Skinner, even though I know he has a low opinion of me. He's a man of character. I will help you out on this, if I can. Besides, I've got to protect my investment."

I wrote a phone number on my card and handed it to him. "If you find out anything tonight, call me here. Otherwise leave a message with my answering service."

I was pretty sure he could have told me what I wanted to know right then and there, but I went along with his act. The butler showed me out. He didn't wish me good night.

There was nothing more I could do on the Skinner case that night.

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I stopped in to pick up my horn and took a cab down to McDermott's. A group of us got together to jam there on Wednesday nights. We were getting a nice sound together and even considering going pro. I hated to miss a session.

Layton called about two thirty. Fat Sam, the Greek bartender, told me someone wanted to talk to me on the pay phone by the dart board. Layton said what he had to in about a dozen words and hung up before I had time to thank him. I went back to playing and let the information simmer on my back burner.

The girl with the toothpaste smile at Skinner's office was more cordial as I strolled in the next morning. She called me Mr. DuPre instead of sir and said Mr. Skinner was expecting me.

Skinner looked like he'd got a good ten minutes of sleep the night before. His eyes were underlined with purple and he had the nicotine stains of chain smoking on his fingers. He crushed a butt out as I entered his office.

"I've been considering this matter very seriously, Mr. DuPre. I'm thinking that maybe I should go to the police to tell them what I know about that killing yesterday. I feel that it's my duty."

"Well, that's your prerogative, Mr. Skinner," I said, sitting down across from him. "But first I think there are a few facts which you should know about. And I'd like to bring your partner in on this as well."

"I don't really think that's called for at this point."

"I'll have to insist. What I have to tell you is going to mean an important decision for both of you."

Skinner reluctantly agreed. He had his secretary buzz Thompson. The tall man appeared a few minutes later and sat opposite me in front of Skinner's desk.

Skinner first filled in Thompson about the blackmail attempt and about what had happened at the payoff the day before. Thompson was appropriately horrified, appropriately concerned. Then Skinner turned the floor over to me.

"Mr. Skinner, I've found out who the guy was in the plaid suit. His name was Pete Massey. 'The Mouse' they called him. He was a ten-cent grifter who did odd jobs for anybody who'd have him. Recently he'd been working for Big Ed Holliman, one of the top loan sharks in the city. He mainly delivered messages to sluggish borrowers, just friendly warnings on what might happen if they didn't

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speed up their payments. He wasn't big enough to push anybody around himself.

"The Mouse spent about half of his life in prison. His escapades, from petty larceny to numbers running, would fill a textbook on losers. That thirty grand he had in his hand when he died was probably the most money he'd touched in his life.

"Yeah, The Mouse made a lot of mistakes, but the biggest one was to try to shag an extra five thou from your daughter as a side show to the main scam with you. Doreen wasn't as civilized about the business as you were. She passed on word to Rudy Layton. Layton put out feelers. As soon as he found out who was behind the squeeze, he gave the word that The Mouse was persona non grata in the land of the living. The little guy hung around the same spot too long and was fingered. Curtains."

"But how did he know—?" Skinner asked.

"About Layton's investment in your firm? About the waterfront deal? He didn't at first. He wasn't smart enough to write his own name. Somebody else was the brains behind this. Massey was just the hired hand. You thought it was Layton behind him. But Rudy wouldn't have gone through with the threat, exposed himself to the publicity, ruined a business he had money in. And he's not the guy to make empty threats. Besides, if his boys knew what was up, they would certainly have grabbed the package that Massey was carrying when he was dropped. Why pass up thirty easy grand?"

"So it was Holliman," Thompson suggested.

"Not likely, Mr. Thompson. Holliman has millions out on the street collecting five percent a week. He's not going to take a chance on a small-time blackmail racket. And if he did, he wouldn't send somebody who could be identified with him to collect in broad daylight. And how would he have known of Layton's connection with your firm in the first place? It's not something Rudy would be likely to talk about."

"Well, who then?" Skinner demanded.

"I think it was Mr. Thompson, here."

Skinner emitted a hoarse croak that was supposed to be a laugh. Thompson looked across at me, appropriately offended.

"I don't think the situation calls for that kind of humor, Mr. DuPre," Skinner said.

"I'm not trying to be funny. Thompson knew about the marriage, and about Layton's investment. He clearly knew how important the waterfront project was to you, knew you couldn't afford to say no.

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And he probably had a good enough idea of your personal finances to know just how much he could soak you for."

"I think this has gone far enough, Arthur," Thompson said. "I'm not going to sit here and listen to these ridiculous accusations from this hoodlum."

"Yes, really, Mr. DuPre, I don't think—"

"Let me finish. I wondered about that blackmail letter from the beginning. It seemed to be written by someone who knew the business, knew exactly where to take the information. It was too exact, too confident, too specific."

Thompson started to interrupt again, but I kept talking.

"The question, of course, is motive. Thompson's a partner in a successful business. He's pulling down a substantial salary. I tried to piece it together. Why would he take the risk? First, Holliman's a loan shark. The majority of people who get involved with sharks are compulsive gamblers. Maybe that covers Thompson. Though he probably makes himself out to be a casual horse player." I stopped. The two men traded looks. Skinner's mouth dropped.

"Let's say he loses big and has to go to Holliman for the money to pay his bookie," I continued. "But he keeps losing and can't afford to pay Holliman back. Big Ed sends Massey around to put on some pressure. Thompson gets desperate. He panics. Since he doesn't know many hoods, he gets The Mouse to help him out in putting the touch on his partner."

"So help me, Arthur, this is slander." Thompson's indignation lacked conviction. Skinner looked confused.

"And one other thing, Mr. Thompson. I had a chance to go through Massey's pockets before the cops arrived. I found a scrap of gum wrapper with a phone number written on it. It was your phone number."

To be a compulsive gambler you have to be a sucker. Thompson was no exception. He swallowed my bluff whole. "Why that stupid little—" He stopped, but the words were already out.

Skinner's face reddened. He glared at his partner. Thompson sank back in his chair and looked down at his hands.

"Now, Mr. Skinner, you still have a problem, of course," I explained. "If you go to the police with any of this, the whole story will have to come out. They'll never pin Layton with Massey's killing. Thompson here will probably end up with a suspended sentence for extortion. And your company will surely wind up losing the

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waterfront project, to say nothing of the damage that will result from the scandal over the blackmail."

"Yes, you have a point all right. What would you suggest?"

"Pay Thompson the $60,000 right now."

They both looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"You're obviously quite heavily in debt, Mr. Thompson, or you wouldn't have tried this stunt in the first place. The sixty grand will get Holliman off your back, at least for now. In exchange you sign over your interest in Skinner and Thompson to your partner. That's the price you pay. That's where it ends."

And that's where it did end. I read in the business section of the paper a few days later that Percy Thompson, of Skinner and Thompson, Inc., had resigned from the firm for "personal reasons."

It wasn't until several weeks later, after his company had been awarded the waterfront contracts, that Arthur Skinner showed up at the lunch-hour jam session. Everyone was impressed by his trombone solo on "Perdido."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

BIG BLAST

by CARL WOLFGANG MAIWALD

At his birthday party, tycoon Hurst
Tried to blow out the candles at one burst.
  But his heirs rigged a trick—
  Dynamite candlestick—
So the candles just blew him out first.

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"Sheerest artistry" . . . "magic instant" . . . "magnetic" . . . "hypnotic" . . . "hauntingly sad" . . .

THE CRY OF A VIOLIN

by SEYMOUR SHUBIN

Jealous? I was jealous? It was not true! Oh, maybe for just a few moments. But that was earlier, before I saw what I swear I saw and heard what I swear I heard. After all, what I have had out of life has been considerable, has it not? My life has been a full one, no? It has been enriched by music but not consumed by it, and no man could ask for more—the complete love and admiration of a wife, the joy of children and grandchildren, a house that has brought me so much pleasure (four of the Orchestra live on the same quaint little street, and we have a small chamber group too), the affection of my pupils (I would take only three), and prestige and recognition enough.

We of the Civic are not exactly looked down upon, you know. I mean, even the grocer—I say this only in passing—even he showed a certain, well, a certain respect. Or take the evening of the boy's concert, for instance. Abbie (she's the one who looks so like Margaret, though she has my temperament) Abbie said excitedly, "Papa, Mr. Hendrickson at school found out you were with the Civic! Oh, you should have heard him! I was so proud. And do you know what? He asked would you play the violin at assembly some time. Would you, Papa? Would you?" She was so happy when I said yes, and I remember when I did it years ago for the married ones also. It is good to see that pride for you in your children's eyes.

Or take later that evening when Margaret drove me to the Town Hall (do you know she would not let me drive after we were married, and that once in a while she would still hold my hands so gently in hers, as though my hands were jewels?), we were walking toward the entrance through the crowd when there was a whisper, "The white-haired one—that's Franchetti," in such a tone of adulation that Margaret pressed my arm, though neither of us looked. This

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happened often and I just mention it to show you that I did not lack for certain things.

As for the boy, I assure you his name in large letters on placards did not arouse the slightest envy in me. It so happened that night the posters were for Anton Slubiak, "seven-year-old violin virtuoso" whose debut this was in America; but on another night they would tell of someone else. We in the Orchestra had seen child prodigies come and go and we took them quite calmly. And remember too that each of us had been a prodigy in our time.

Backstage that night there was the usual banter and humor and even horseplay, for you will find that with most of us in the Civic the human being is not lost in the artist, yet through it raced that pulse of excitement the years never take away. Then, once again, came the good feeling of stepping on the stage and walking to your chair and tuning your instrument or practising intricate little passages amid the cacophony that is so stirring to the blood.

And then, the applause for the conductor fading, there was that moment of waiting, which is so much like a held breath, for the thrust of the poised baton; and now the quick stern motion and a sudden glorious flooding of sound into what had been a vacuum, and over each of us the exalted sense of being a part of one of the world's most perfect instruments, where anything less than the sheerest artistry from the farthest chair can jar and distort the whole.

The boy did not come out until much later, when the orchestral part of the program was over and, at our conductor's gesture, we had risen to thunderous applause. He stepped from the wing, a small round-faced boy in short trousers, with large solemn eyes and sandy hair clipped evenly across his forehead. He walked to the center of the stage and stood there uncertainly, then looked back at the wing, at a tall balding man whose face was grave and whose forehead glistened. This was his father, who had brought the boy here from some mountain village in Europe and was, I recalled reading somewhere, his teacher.

The father nodded once, sternly, then again, urging him on, and now the boy put the violin awkwardly to his throat and I felt a hot flush of nervousness for him—but only until, with a suddenly graceful, delicate motion, he touched bow to string, and in that magic instant I found myself leaning forward, drawn by a force that was almost magnetic. For standing on that stage—oh, there is a difference, there is a difference—was not simply a superbly talented child with a violin tucked under his chin but one of those rare few, a

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handful in this world at most, who seem to open their own veins to an instrument, so that each becomes part of the other and fired by the same heartbeat.

I forced myself to sit up after a time, aware that for the past few hypnotic moments I had been fantasying myself out there, with that music flowing from my violin and all those eyes, all of them on me. And even now I had to catch myself from slipping off again, from calling back old dreams, things I had thought long dead in me, and I tried to keep telling myself that what I had now was the good life, it was better—and yet hadn't that music been in me once? Oh, I had it at one time, I had that fire, that certain genius, that—but where did it go? Where had I lost my way?

And now, though I struggled against it, my thoughts were going back, probing, searching—to that little immigrant boy at the settlement-house music school and his teacher taking him to play for a rich old woman and her kissing him afterward and touching her eyes and then more lessons and playing for the old woman's friends and then concerts and the scrapbook growing and then meeting Margaret, and at nineteen, to be tugged in two directions, for the old woman said no, go to Europe, but getting married instead and accepting an offer from the Civic, proud he was the youngest and certain some day he still would be a concert violinist, but then the first child came, and finding so much more to the world, so many new and marvelous things, and then the other children, and one day no longer caring that he was not the youngest any more . . .

Shouting and wild applause shook me then, as if from a dream, and Anton, awkward once more, was looking around in childish bewilderment during one of the most tumultuous ovations I have ever heard, and it took frantic gesticulations from his father before the boy bowed. I glanced at those nearest me, at Krakoff with his violin on his knees, and Heller with his cello between his legs, and their faces seemed tired and a little sad, though Krakoff's had a tremble of a smile; and now, even as we joined in and tapped our bows against the edges of our stands, I wondered were they thinking of old scrapbooks too.

Later, backstage, Anton and his father were surrounded by a loud and enthusiastic group of people who were joined presently by the mayor and his wife, led by the animated chairman of the Civic Orchestra Association. They were patting the boy's head and talking into his face, some of it in his language, but he never spoke a word; indeed, he seemed frightened, it was in his eyes and face, especially

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as he darted little glances at his father. And the father—it amazes me that no one else seemed to notice—had a look of restrained fury, even though he spoke with a touch of a smile, a forced smile, to the group, explaining in broken English how he himself "before the arthritis" had hoped to be a concert violinist and how Anton had first picked up the violin at two and had been playing less than a year after that.

"Nine-ten hour a day he practise," the father said. But all the while I could see the fury. I had seen it in the faces of other teachers in my time, before it would finally burst out; but usually it was over some obvious error, perhaps a strident note or too much dallying over decorative arpeggios or some overly stretched phrasing. But, in God's name, *here?* I had heard perfection. What more could he *want?*

I walked to the dressing room. Changing into street clothes, I thought of Margaret waiting for me near the car and how she would want to go to a restaurant as we usually did, to talk about the concert over coffee and cigarettes. I had always looked forward to it, but not that night. Not totally, that is. A part of me wanted to be with Margaret and go to that restaurant and later, perhaps, watch television—do all the normal, joyous things of life. But another part of me, though loathing that father, wondered what heights I might have reached had I had someone to drive me even beyond my gifts.

The other men were leaving now. I did not know I was alone until I heard the music.

From the corridor came a lament—a violin's lament—so thin and tender and hauntingly sad it was as though the instrument itself were whimpering gently and full of tears. I walked out, puzzled and moved, and looking down the empty corridor saw that it was coming from the partly open door to Anton's dressing room. I wanted to leave and yet was unable to tear away, for the quivering beauty of what I heard, now like a pleading, now a cry, touched something in me and held on, bringing a tightness to my throat.

I stood there, wondering so deeply stirred how any child could know of such emotion and give it tongue, when suddenly I heard his father's voice, cutting harshly through those strains. Astonished, I took a few steps forward, trying to hear; and though I could not understand the language, I could the tone, and it was as if he wanted the boy to be *quiet*, for he repeated his name several times in a stern and warning way. Yet, even though his voice ran angrily through

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it, that music kept pouring out, as tremulous and plaintive as a sob; and now, a shiver on my flesh, it drew me closer to the room.

Soon I was standing next to the door, a little beating in my temples, peering anxiously through the slight opening but seeing only part of the father's arm. I pushed the door open a little wider. The father, his back to me, stood facing Anton. He whirled. For moments we stared at each other. Then I looked at Anton, and my whole body went glazed.

I do not know what happened inside my head. But it was as though every vein burst, and suddenly I was in the room, grabbing hold of something—a lamp, a marble-based lamp, I learned—and I was swinging it at the father's head, again and again. Then I turned blindly on the child, unable to hold back in horror. I wanted the father dead, but God forgive me for the child.

They said at my trial that jealousy drove me insane, that I wanted to believe the father had so pressured and driven the child, had worked him so long and so relentlessly, that he had turned him into something monstrous. They said it was my mind's way of clinging to the belief that I had taken the right route in life, had not made the violin my life. And sometimes, as I pace the locked confines of the ward, I wonder if they are right, if some dark part of me had imagined what I saw and heard. But no. I must believe it—or agree I am mad.

The boy was staring at his father, tears pouring down his cheeks and chest heaving. And he was crying the cry of a violin.

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a *NEW* short story by

BILL PRONZINI

"Nothing much goes on in a small town like Tule River, and such a hanging was bound to stir up folks' imaginations. There hadn't been a killing in the area in four or five years" . . . A chilling story . . .

THE HANGING MAN

by BILL PRONZINI

It was Sam McCullough who found the hanging man, down on the river bank behind his livery stable.

Straightaway he went looking for Ed Bozeman and me, being as we were the local sheriff's deputies. Tule River didn't have any full-time law officers back then, in the late 1890s; just volunteers like Boze and me to keep the peace, and a fat-bottomed sheriff who came through from the county seat two or three days a month to look things over and to stuff himself on pig's knuckles at the Germany Café.

Time was just past sunup, on one of those frosty mornings Northern California gets in late November, and Sam found Boze already to work inside his mercantile. But they had to come fetch me out of my house, where I was just sitting down to breakfast. I never did open up my place of business—Miller's Feed and Grain—until 8:30 of a weekday morning.

I had some trouble believing it when Sam first told about the hanging man. He said, "Well, how in hell do you think *I* felt." He always has been an excitable sort and he was frothed up for fair just then. "I like to had a hemorrhage when I saw him hanging there on that black oak. Damnedest sight a man ever stumbled on."

"You say he's a stranger?"

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"Stranger to me. Never seen him before."

"You make sure he's dead?"

Sam made a snorting noise. "I ain't even going to answer that. You just come along and see for yourself."

I got my coat, told my wife Ginny to ring up Doc Petersen on Mr. Bell's invention, and then hustled out with Sam and Boze. It was mighty cold that morning; the sky was clear and brittle-looking, like blue-painted glass, and the sun had the look of a two-day-old egg yolk above the tule marshes east of the river. When we came in alongside the stable I saw that there was silvery frost all over the grass on the river bank. You could hear it crunch when you walked on it.

The hanging man had frost on him, too. He was strung up on a fat old oak between the stable and the river, opposite a high board fence that separated Sam's property from Joel Pennywell's fixit shop next door. Dressed mostly in black, he was—black denims, black boots, a black cutaway coat that had seen better days. He had black hair, too, long and kind of matted. And a black tongue pushed out at one corner of a black-mottled face. All that black was streaked in silver, and there was silver on the rope that stretched between his neck and the thick limb above. He was the damnedest sight a man ever stumbled on, all right. Frozen up there, silver and black, glistening in the cold sunlight, like something cast up from the Pit.

We stood looking at him for a time, not saying anything. There was a thin wind off the river and I could feel it prickling up the hair on my neck. But it didn't stir that hanging man, nor any part of him or his clothing.

Boze cleared his throat, and he did it loud enough to make me jump. He asked me, "You know him, Carl?"

"No," I said. "You?"

"No. Drifter, you think?"

"Got the look of one."

Which he did. He'd been in his thirties, smallish, with a clean-shaven fox face and pointy ears. His clothes were shabby, shirt cuffs frayed, button missing off his cutaway coat. We got us a fair number of drifters in Tule River, up from San Francisco or over from the mining country after their luck and their money ran out—men looking for farm work or such other jobs as they could find. Or sometimes looking for trouble. Boze and I had caught one just two weeks before and locked him up for chicken stealing.

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"What I want to know," Sam said, "is what in the name of hell he's doing *here?*"

Boze shrugged and rubbed at his bald spot, like he always does when he's fuddled. He was the same age as me, thirty-four, but he'd been losing his hair for the past ten years. He said, "Appears he's been hanging a while. When'd you close up last evening, Sam?"

"Six, like always."

"Anybody come around afterwards?"

"No."

"Could've happened any time after six, then. It's kind of a lonely spot back here after dark. I reckon there's not much chance anybody saw what happened."

"Joel Pennywell, maybe," I said. "He stays open late some nights."

"We can ask him."

Sam said, "But why'd anybody string him up like that?"

"Maybe he wasn't strung up. Maybe he hung himself."

"Suicide?"

"It's been known to happen," Boze said.

Doc Petersen showed up just then, and a couple of other townsfolk with him; word was starting to get around. Doc, who was sixty and dyspeptic, squinted up at the hanging man, grunted, and said, "Strangulation."

"Doc?"

"Strangulation. Man strangled to death. You can see that from the way his tongue's out. Neck's not broken; you can see that too."

"Does that mean he could've killed himself?"

"All it means," Doc said, "is that he didn't jump off a high branch or get jerked hard enough off a horse to break his neck."

"Wasn't a horse involved anyway," I said. "There'd be shoe marks in the area; ground was soft enough last night, before the freeze. Boot marks here and there, but that's all."

"I don't know anything about that," Doc said. "All I know is, that gent up there died of strangulation. You want me to tell you anything else, you'll have to cut him down first."

Sam and Boze went to the stable to fetch a ladder. While they were gone I paced around some, to see if there was anything to find in the vicinity. And I did find something, about a dozen feet from the oak where the boot tracks were heaviest in the grass. It was a circlet of bronze, about three inches in diameter, and when I picked it up, I saw that it was one of those Presidential Medals the government used to issue at the Philadelphia Mint. On one side it had

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a likeness of Benjamin Harrison, along with his name and the date of his inauguration, 1889, and on the other were a tomahawk, a peace pipe, and a pair of clasped hands.

There weren't many such medals in California; mostly they'd been supplied to Army officers in other parts of the West, who handed them out to Indians after peace treaties were signed. But this one struck a chord in my memory: I recollected having seen it or one like it some months back. The only thing was, I couldn't quite remember where.

Before I could think any more on it, Boze and Sam came back with the ladder, a plank board, and a horse blanket. Neither of them seemed inclined to do the job at hand, so I climbed up myself and sawed through that half-frozen rope with my pocket knife. It wasn't good work; my mouth was dry when it was done. When we had him down we covered him up and laid him on the plank. Then we carried him out to Doc's wagon and took him to the Spencer Funeral Home.

After Doc and Obe Spencer stripped the body, Boze and I went through the dead man's clothing. There was no identification of any kind; if he'd been carrying any before he died, somebody had filched it. No wallet or purse, either. All he had in his pockets was the stub of a lead pencil, a half-used book of matches, a short-six seegar, a nearly empty Bull Durham sack, three wheatstraw papers, a two-bit piece, an old Spanish *real* coin, and a dog-eared and stained copy of a Beadle dime novel called *Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road; Or, The Black-Hoods of Shasta.*

"Drifter, all right," Boze said when we were done. "Wouldn't you say, Carl?"

"Sure seems that way."

"But even drifters have more belongings than this. Shaving gear, extra clothes—at least that much."

"You'd think so," I said. "Might be he had a carpetbag or the like and it's hidden somewhere along the river bank."

"Either that or it was stolen. But we can go take a look when Doc gets through studying on the body."

I fished out the bronze medal I'd found in the grass earlier and showed it to him. "Picked this up while you and Sam were getting the ladder," I said.

"Belonged to the hanging man, maybe."

"Maybe. But it seems familiar, somehow. I can't quite place where I've seen one like it."

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Boze turned the medal over in his hand. "Doesn't ring any bells for me," he said.

"Well, you don't see many around here, and the one I recollect was also a Benjamin Harrison. Could be coincidence, I suppose. Must be if that fella died by his own hand."

"If he did."

"Boze, you think it *was* suicide?"

"I'm hoping it was," he said, but he didn't sound any more convinced than I was. "I don't like the thought of a murderer running around loose in Tule River."

"That makes two of us," I said.

Doc didn't have much to tell us when he came out. The hanging man had been shot once a long time ago—he had bullet scars on his right shoulder and back—and one foot was missing a pair of toes. There was also a fresh bruise on the left side of his head, above the ear.

Boze asked, "Is it a big bruise, Doc?"

"Big enough."

"Could somebody have hit him hard enough to knock him out?"

"And then hung him afterward? Well, it could've happened that way. His neck's full of rope burns and lacerations, the way it would be if somebody hauled him up over that tree limb."

"Can you reckon how long he's been dead?"

"Last night some time. Best I can do."

Boze and I headed back to the livery stable. The town had come awake by this time. There were plenty of people on the boardwalks and Main Street was crowded with horses and farm wagons; any day now I expected to see somebody with one of those newfangled motor cars. The hanging man was getting plenty of lip service, on Main Street and among the crowd that had gathered back of the stable to gawk at the black oak and trample the grass.

Nothing much goes on in a small town like Tule River, and such as a hanging was bound to stir up folks' imaginations. There hadn't been a killing in the area in four or five years. And damned little mystery since the town was founded back in the days when General Vallejo owned most of the land hereabouts and it was the Mexican flag, not the Stars and Stripes, that flew over California.

None of the crowd had found anything in the way of evidence on the river bank; they would have told us if they had. None of them knew anything about the hanging man, either. That included Joel

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Pennywell, who had come over from his fixit shop next door. He'd closed up around 6:30 last night, he said, and gone straight on home.

After a time Boze and I moved down to the river's edge and commenced a search among the tule grass and trees that grew along there. The day had warmed some; the wind was down and the sun had melted off the last of the frost. A few of the others joined in with us, eager and boisterous, like it was an Easter egg hunt. It was too soon for the full impact of what had happened to settle in on most folks; it hadn't occurred to them yet that maybe they ought to be concerned.

A few minutes before ten o'clock, while we were combing the west-side bank up near the Main Street Basin, and still not finding anything, the Whipple youngster came running to tell us that Roberto Ortega and Sam McCullough wanted to see us at the livery stable. Roberto owned a dairy ranch just south of town and claimed to be a descendant of a Spanish conquistador. He was also an honest man, which was why he was in town that morning. He'd found a saddled horse grazing on his pastureland and figured it for a runaway from Sam's livery, so he'd brought it in. But Sam had never seen the animal, an old swaybacked roan, until Roberto showed up with it. Nor had he ever seen the battered carpetbag that was tied behind the cantle of the cheap Mexican saddle.

It figured to be the drifter's horse and carpetbag, sure enough. But whether the drifter had turned the animal loose himself, or somebody else had, we had no way of knowing. As for the carpetbag, it didn't tell us any more about the hanging man than the contents of his pockets. Inside it were some extra clothes, an old Colt Dragoon revolver, shaving tackle, a woman's garter, and nothing at all that might identify the owner.

Sam took the horse, and Boze and I took the carpetbag over to Obe Spencer's to put with the rest of the hanging man's belongings. On the way we held a conference. Fact was, a pair of grain barges were due upriver from San Francisco at eleven, for loading and return. I had three men working for me, but none of them handled the paperwork; I was going to have to spend some time at the feed mill that day, whether I wanted to or not. Which is how it is when you have part-time deputies who are also full-time businessmen. It was a fact of small-town life we'd had to learn to live with.

We worked it out so that Boze would continue making inquiries while I went to work at the mill. Then we'd switch off at one o'clock so he could give his wife Ellie, who was minding the mercantile,

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some help with customers and with the drummers who always flocked around with Christmas wares right after Thanksgiving.

We also decided that if neither of us turned up any new information by five o'clock—or even if we did—we would ring up the county seat and make a full report to the sheriff. Not that Joe Perkins would be able to find out anything we couldn't. He was a fat-cat political appointee, and about all he knew how to find was pig's knuckles and beer. But we were bound to do it by the oath of office we'd taken.

We split up at the funeral parlor and I went straight to the mill. My foreman, Gene Kleinschmidt, had opened up; I'd given him a set of keys and he knew to go ahead and unlock the place if I wasn't around. The barges came in twenty minutes after I did, and I had to hustle to get the paperwork ready that they would be carrying back down to San Francisco—bills of lading, requisitions for goods from three different companies.

I finished up a little past noon and went out onto the dock to watch the loading. One of the bargemen was talking to Gene. And while he was doing it, he kept flipping something up and down in his hand—a small gold nugget. It was the kind of thing folks made into a watch fob, or kept as a good-luck charm.

And that was how I remembered where I'd seen the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Medal. Eight months or so back a newcomer to the area, a man named Jubal Parsons, had come in to buy some sacks of chicken feed. When he'd reached into his pocket to pay the bill he had accidentally come out with the medal. "Good-luck charm," he'd said, and let me glance at it before putting it away again.

Back inside my office I sat down and thought about Jubal Parsons. He was a tenant farmer—had taken over a small farm owned by the Siler brothers out near Willow Creek about nine months ago. Big fellow, over six feet tall, and upwards of 220 pounds. Married to a blonde woman named Greta, a few years younger than him and pretty as they come. Too pretty, some said; a few of the womenfolk, Ellie Bozeman included, thought she had the look and mannerisms of a tramp.

Parsons came into Tule River two or three times a month to trade for supplies, but you seldom saw the wife. Neither of them went to church on Sunday, nor to any of the social events at the Odd Fellows Hall. Parsons kept to himself mostly, didn't seem to have any friends or any particular vices. Always civil, at least to me, but taciturn

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and kind of broody-looking. Not the sort of fellow you find yourself liking much.

But did the medal I'd found belong to him? And if it did, had he hung the drifter? And if he had, what was his motive?

I was still puzzling on that when Boze showed up. He was a half hour early, and he had Floyd Jones with him. Floyd looked some like Santa Claus—fat and jolly and white-haired—and he liked it when you told him so. He was the night bartender at the Elkhorn Bar and Grill.

Boze said, "Got some news, Carl. Floyd here saw the hanging man last night. Recognized the body over to Obe Spencer's just now."

Floyd bobbed his head up and down. "He came into the Elkhorn about eight o'clock, asking for work."

I said, "How long did he stay?"

"Half hour, maybe. Told him we already had a swamper and he spent five minutes trying to convince me he'd do a better job of cleaning up. Then he gave it up when he come to see I wasn't listening, and bought a beer and nursed it over by the stove. Seemed he didn't much relish going back into the cold."

"He say anything else to you?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Didn't give his name, either," Boze said. "But there's something else. Tell him, Floyd."

"Well, there was another fella came in just after the drifter," Floyd said. "Ordered a beer and sat watching him. Never took his eyes off that drifter once. I wouldn't have noticed except for that and because we were near empty. Cold kept most everybody to home last night."

"You know this second man?" I asked.

"Sure do. Local farmer. Newcomer to the area, only been around for—"

"Jubal Parsons?"

Floyd blinked at me. "Now how in thunder did you know that?"

"Lucky guess. Parsons leave right after the drifter?"

"He did. Not more than ten seconds afterward."

"You see which direction they went?"

"Downstreet, I think. Toward Sam McCullough's livery."

I thanked Floyd for his help and shooed him on his way. When he was gone Boze asked me, "Just how did you know it was Jubal Parsons?"

"I finally remembered where I'd seen that Presidential Medal I

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found. Parsons showed it when he was here one day several months ago. Said it was his good-luck charm."

Boze rubbed at his bald spot. "That and Floyd's testimony make a pretty good case against him, don't they?"

"They do. Reckon I'll go out and have a talk with him."

"We'll both go," Boze said. "Ellie can mind the store the rest of the day. This is more important. Besides, if Parsons *is* a killer, it'll be safer if there are two of us."

I didn't argue; a hero is something I never was nor wanted to be. We left the mill and went and picked up Boze's buckboard from behind the mercantile. On the way out of town we stopped by his house and mine long enough to fetch our rifles. Then we headed west on Willow Creek Road.

It was a long cool ride out to Jubal Parsons' tenant farm, through a lot of rich farmland and stands of willows and evergreens. Neither of us said much. There wasn't much to say. But I was tensed up and I could see that Boze was, too.

A rutted trail hooked up to the farm from Willow Creek Road, and Boze jounced the buckboard along there some past three o'clock. It was pretty modest acreage. Just a few fields of corn and alfalfa, with a cluster of ramshackle buildings set near where Willow Creek cut through the northwest corner. There was a one-room farmhouse, a chicken coop, a barn, a couple of lean-tos, and a pole corral. That was all except for a small windmill—a Fairbanks, Morse Eclipse—that the Siler brothers had put up because the creek was dry more than half the year.

When we came in sight of the buildings I could tell that Jubal Parsons had done work on the place. The farmhouse had a fresh coat of whitewash, as did the chicken coop, and the barn had a new roof.

There was nobody in the farmyard, just half a dozen squawking leghorns, when we pulled in and Boze drew rein. But as soon as we stepped down, the front door of the house opened and Greta Parsons came out on the porch. She was wearing a calico dress and high-button shoes, but her head was bare; that butter-yellow hair of hers hung down to her hips, glistening like the bargeman's gold nugget in the sun. She was some pretty woman, for a fact. It made your throat thicken up just to look at her, and funny ideas start to stir around in your head. If ever there was a woman to tempt a man to sin, I thought, it was this one.

Boze stayed near the buckboard, with his rifle held loose in one hand, while I went over to the porch steps and took off my hat. "I'm

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Carl Miller, Mrs. Parsons," I said. "That's Ed Bozeman back there. We're from Tule River. Maybe you remember seeing us?"

"Yes, Mr. Miller. I remember you."

"We'd like a few words with your husband. Would he be somewhere nearby?"

"He's in the barn," she said. There was something odd about her voice—a kind of dullness, as if she was fatigued. She moved that way, too, loose and jerky. She didn't seem to notice Boze's rifle, or to care if she did.

I said, "Do you want to call him out for us?"

"No, you go on in. It's all right."

I nodded to her and rejoined Boze, and we walked on over to the barn. Alongside it was a McCormick & Deering binder-harvester, and further down, under a lean-to, was an old buggy with its storm curtains buttoned up. A big gray horse stood in the corral, nuzzling a pile of hay. The smell of dust and earth and manure was ripe on the cool air.

The barn doors were shut. I opened one half, stood aside from the opening, and called out, "Mr. Parsons? You in there?"

No answer.

I looked at Boze. He said, "We'll go in together," and I nodded. Then we shouldered up and I pulled the other door half open. And we went inside.

It was shadowed in there, even with the doors open; those parts of the interior I could make out were empty. I eased away from Boze, toward where the corn crib was. There was sweat on me; I wished I'd taken my own rifle out of the buckboard.

"Mr. Parsons?"

Still no answer. I would have tried a third time, but right then Boze said, "Never mind, Carl," in a way that made me turn around and face him.

He was a dozen paces away, staring down at something under the hayloft. I frowned and moved over to him. Then I saw it too, and my mouth came open and there was a slithery feeling on my back.

Jubal Parsons was lying there dead on the sod floor, with blood all over his shirtfront and the side of his face. He'd been shot. There was a .45-70 Springfield rifle beside the body, and when Boze bent down and struck a match, you could see the black-powder marks mixed up with the blood.

"My God," I said, soft.

"Shot twice," Boze said. "Head and chest."

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"Twice rules out suicide."

"Yeah," he said.

We traded looks in the dim light. Then we turned and crossed back to the doors. When we came out Mrs. Parsons was sitting on the front steps of the house, looking past the windmill at the alfalfa fields. We went over and stopped in front of her. The sun was at our backs, and the way we stood put her in our shadow. That was what made her look up; she hadn't seen us coming, or heard us crossing the yard.

She said, "Did you find him?"

"We found him," Boze said. He took out his badge and showed it to her. "We're county sheriff's deputies, Mrs. Parsons. You'd best tell us what happened in there."

"I shot him," she said. Matter-of-fact, like she was telling you the time of day. "This morning, just after breakfast. Ever since I've wanted to hitch up the buggy and drive in and tell about it, but I couldn't seem to find the courage. It took all the courage I had to fire the rifle."

"But why'd you do a thing like that?"

"Because of what he did in Tule River last night."

"You mean the hanging man?"

"Yes. Jubal killed him."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes. Not long before I shot him."

"Why did he do it—hang that fellow?"

"He was crazy jealous, that's why."

I asked her, "Who was the dead man?"

"I don't know."

"You mean to say he was a stranger?"

"Yes," she said. "I only saw him once. Yesterday afternoon. He rode in looking for work. I told him we didn't have any, that we were tenant farmers, but he wouldn't leave. He kept following me around, saying things. He thought I was alone here—a woman alone."

"Did he—make trouble for you?"

"Just with words. He kept saying things, ugly things. Men like that—I don't know why, but they think I'm a woman of easy virtue. It has always been that way, no matter where we've lived."

"What did you do?" Boze asked.

"Ignored him at first. Then I begged him to go away. I told him my husband was wild jealous, but he didn't believe me. I thought

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I was alone too, you see; I thought Jubal had gone off to work in the fields."

"But he hadn't?"

"Oh, he had. But he came back while the drifter was here and he overheard part of what was said."

"Did he show himself to the man?"

"No. He would have if matters had gone beyond words, but that didn't happen. After a while he got tired of tormenting me and went away. The drifter, I mean."

"Then what happened?"

"Jubal saddled his horse and followed him. He followed that man into Tule River and when he caught up with him he knocked him on the head and he hung him."

Boze and I traded another look. I said what both of us were thinking: "Just for deviling you? He hung a man for that?"

"I told you, Jubal was crazy jealous. You didn't know him. You just—you don't know how he was. He said that if a man thought evil, and spoke evil, it was the same as doing evil. He said if a man was wicked, he deserved to be hung for his wickedness and the world would be a better place for his leaving it."

She paused, and then made a gesture with one hand at her bosom. It was a meaningless kind of gesture, but you could see where a man might take it the wrong way. Might take *her* the wrong way, just like she'd said. And not just a man, either: women, too. Everybody that didn't keep their minds open and went rooting around after sin in other folks.

"Besides," she went on, "he worshipped the ground I stand on. He truly did, you know. He couldn't bear the thought of anyone sullying me."

I cleared my throat. The sweat on me had dried and I felt cold now. "Did you hate him, Mrs. Parsons?"

"Yes, I hated him. Oh, yes. I feared him, too—for a long time I feared him more than anything else. He was so big. And so strong-willed. I used to tremble sometimes, just to look at him."

"Was he cruel to you?" Boze asked. "Did he hurt you?"

"He was and he did. But not the way you mean; he didn't beat me, or once lay a hand to me the whole nine years we were married. It was his vengeance that hurt me. I couldn't stand it, I couldn't take any more of it."

She looked away from us again, out over the alfalfa fields—and a long ways beyond them, at something only she could see. "No

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roots," she said, "that was part of it, too. No roots. Moving here, moving there, always moving—three states and five homesteads in less than ten years. And the fear. And the waiting. This was the last time, I couldn't take it ever again. Not one more minute of his jealousy, his cruelty . . . *his* wickedness."

"Ma'am, you're not making sense—"

"But I am," she said. "Don't you see? He was Jubal Parsons, the Hanging Man."

I started to say something, but she shifted position on the steps just then—and when she did that her face came out of shadow and into the sunlight, and I saw in her eyes a kind of terrible knowledge. It put a chill on my neck like the night wind does when it blows across a graveyard.

"That drifter in Tule River wasn't the first man Jubal hung on account of me," she said. "Not even the first in California. That drifter was the Hanging Man's eighth."

DETECTIVERSE

SUSPENDED SENTENCE

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

A tough hangman named Benjamin Croaker
Strung up cowboys caught cheating at poker.
Of those charged with the crime,
He'd hang ten at one time,
For Ben was a real practical choker.

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a *NEW* detective story by

TA HUANG CHI

How do ships—large seaworthy freighters—disappear in good weather without a trace? No wreckage. No survivors . . . In a case like this consult detective David Feng . . .

THE VANISHED SHIPS

by TA HUANG CHI

There were two facts. One of them had been fished up by a fisherman's net in the great Hangchow bore tide when the last full moon had sent its summons to the waters in Hangchow Bay. The battering-ram charge of the bore had surged past the towering Six Harmonies Pagoda on Moon Girdle Hill at the mouth of the Chientang River, making itself felt as far upstream as Yenchow. It had always been so. It was expected. But this time the mystic Dragon Prince, who ruled the bore tides from his court deep in the sea, had acted as the watery pallbearer of a murdered ship's officer. And murder it was—unless fish had taken to carrying hatchets.

The coastal freighter *Shan Szu*, on which the officer had sailed, was listed as ten days overdue on her voyage from Shanghai to Ningpo. That was fact number two. The "Maritime Gazette" reported her as "presumed lost with all hands and the cook," a presumption not shared by all.

One man who thought otherwise was Lo Te-wen, owner of Shan Freight & Steamship Company. He had reason to doubt. A sister ship, the *Shan Pa*, had vanished without a trace on a voyage from Shanghai to Hong Kong. No wreckage. No survivors. That was three months ago.

If Mr. Lo lost another ship the same way, the insurance underwriters might pardonably suspect fraud and refuse to insure the

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remaining eight ships of this dwindling fleet. Worse yet, they might even sue to recover the insurance settlement. The government agencies in Nanking had offered neither help nor hope. In the meantime he was not moving enough cargoes, which meant he was losing money. These dire thoughts impelled Mr. Lo to seek advice from his banker, Mr. Amos Bascombe, now managing director of the Shanghai Merchants Bank.

Mr. Bascombe's advice consisted of three words—consult David Feng.

David Feng opened his desk and took out the two letters that had brought him his present problem. The first was from his friend, Amos Bascombe. It was a polite request to look into a highly confidential matter for one of the bank's valued clients.

The second letter was written in Chinese grass script on plain paper stamped at the bottom with the private red *chuan* seal of Lo Te-wen. It was a letter from a worried man—worried enough, David noted, to pay well for services rendered.

He looked at the two piles of documents representing ten days of patient investigation. One pile completely covered the long table at the end of his study. Ship's logbooks were stacked next to folders containing copies of cargo manifests that threatened to slide into the insurance reports which were leaning precariously over the crew lists. As he watched, a rubber band burst, sending some of the correspondence between Shan Freight & Steamship Company and Lloyds of London dribbling fanwise across a British Admiralty chart of the China coast.

The rest of the letters spilled onto the floor. David picked them up, found another rubber band, and wedged the bundle between a cold teapot and a packet of photographs. He viewed the results with displeasure. The whole mess reminded him of a mound of worked-out mine tailings.

The refined results were almost non-existent, consisting as they did of a few pages of handwritten notes on his desk. He looked once more at the list of possibilities that might have accounted for the disappearance of two cargo ships. It was a short list. His eyes moved down the columns of flowing brush strokes.

Weather conditions had been fair to excellent at the time, and in the general area, when the ships vanished. Both vessels were seaworthy; the marine survey reports from Lloyds were incontrovertible. So much for the first possibility and for natural causes.

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He had ruled out accidents. An accident would have left debris—life jackets, planks, even part of the cargo. No wreckage was ever sighted at sea or found on the beaches. The only physical evidence was the body of the dead officer, and his death was no accident.

"Which," David said into the quiet room, "brings us to pirates." And these, he knew, existed in plenty. The newspapers were still running follow-up stories on the *Empire Leader*. That ship had been seized two days out of port by pirates who had come on board in Canton disguised as contract coolie labor. They had robbed the passengers, off-loaded the cargo into sea-going junks, and sailed away after disabling the engines on the *Empire Leader*. But this could not have been the case for either the *Shan Pa* or the *Shan Szu*. Only the officers and crew were aboard when the two ships sailed from Shanghai on their last voyage.

Both ships had been carrying humdrum cargoes. Baled hides, bagged salt, and boxes of cheap pottery might have appealed to pirates two hundred years ago, but this was 1925, and modern times had elevated piracy from a trade to a profession. The penalty in China for piracy was beheading. Only a high profit would justify such a high risk, and there was scant value in bagged salt and crockery. The only cargo on board that wasn't cheap was the big flood-control pump, crated and carried as deck cargo because it wouldn't fit through the ship's hatches. The market for stolen flood-control pumps was, at best, depressing to think about—even for pirates. David scratched off the cargoes. They weren't worth stealing. The ships were. But how was it being done?

"You better think of something, Mr. Feng," he mumbled to himself. He followed his naked feet through the circular moon door leading into the courtyard above the canal. After a moment's contemplation in the sun it was obvious to David that the sky was clear, the August air hot and sticky, and he was just about as far up Soochow Creek with a problem as anyone could get. It was also, he thought, time to trim the shoe of speculation to fit the foot of reality.

David re-entered his study and picked up the packet of ship photographs from the high-piled table. He spread them out on his desk. On the back of each of the ten photographs Mr. Lo had written the pertinent facts applying to that ship, including class, tonnage, ship builder's name, date of launching, and make and type of engine.

Of the original fleet of ten ships, five of them were as alike as peas in a pod. They had been built in the United States and launched after the November armistice, too late to be of any service to General

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Pershing's army in Europe. Because of the wartime steel shortage, they had been built as composite ships with wooden deck housings and cargo booms. They were modern ships with good engines, and these five included the *Shan Pa* and the *Shan Szu*.

The other five ships of the fleet were older, having been built between 1892 and 1903. They weren't worth stealing. The newer five were.

"Intriguing," he muttered, "but not very informative." David felt like a man shark fishing with a net scantily woven from nine ox hairs. If he was to make a catch he needed more strands for his net. Some of those strands would have to be supplied in Shanghai tomorrow when Mr. Lo was to meet him in the Yu Yuan Gardens.

And Captain Huang. That peppery little man knew everything that floated on—or in—the busiest harbor in the Far East.

On Captain Huang's orders the armed steam launch *Watcher*, flying the flag of the Shanghai Harbor Police, made a tight turn around the stern of the freighter *China Leopard* and headed back up the Whangpoo River. David looked at the freighter's sharp, overhung bow and the raked-back funnel that gave the ship a look of purpose and speed.

"Impressive design for a cargo ship," he commented. "Do you recognize the house-jack?"

"Black Diamond Line," replied Captain Huang, pointing to the big black diamond on a broad yellow band painted on the ship's stack.

"What about the owner?"

"A hard man, but a real worker, David. Why do you ask?"

"Strands for my net, elder brother," came the reply.

"You won't find anything there, David." Captain Huang spoke to the helmsman a moment and pointed ahead to a line of junks. Turning back to David he said, "Ming-yu has cut a few corners in his time, but he's too shrewd to do something as stupid as piracy. He's cunning as hell, I'll say that for him. Out here cunning is a virtue. Cunning men avoid violence."

"How long has he been in shipping?"

"Ten or eleven years. Ming-yu started his company with a few sea-going junks. Hauled cargoes along the whole China coast. Went into steamships about four years ago when he bought the *China Leopard*. Since then he has added two more ships just like her to his fleet. I hear talk he's planning on buying a fourth ship soon."

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"Same design?" David quizzed. "Identical?"

"Exactly the same."

David leaned against the *Watcher's* searchlight and looked slowly up and down the crowded river. All morning they had cruised the long harbor, as far downstream as the Yangtze and back again. He had seen at least one ship from every maritime nation in the world, asked questions of Captain Huang, and listened carefully to the replies. In a few minutes they would be tying up at the Harbor Police dock. He combed through his observations again, looking for common threads to be spun into strands. All he came up with was pocket lint.

The *Watcher* slipped through a line of anchored junks to pass along the starboard side of the *Shan Erh*. David recognized her from Lo Te-wen's photographs and the Shan house-jack, a red dragon on a green band painted on the funnel. The freighter had a bluff bow and a vertical funnel, giving her the appearance of a staid, work-a-day lady of the sea. She was loading cargo from a pair of barges tied up alongside. Across the brown waters of the Whangpoo, David heard the chugging clatter of steam winches reeling in steel cables drawn taut with cargo for the heavily laden ship. A deck gang was battening down the number three hatch. Only one hatch remained open.

"From the look of things I guess she will be out of the mouth of the Yangtze before sunset," David observed.

"There's another cunning man," Huang said, pointing at the *Shan Erh*.

The remark caught David by surprise. "Mr. Lo?"

Captain Huang nodded. "Old Te-wen himself. He could even teach Ming-yu a trick or two. Used to run opium and guns forty years ago. Before my time, anyway. Now he's a very respectable shipping merchant."

David felt a dark seed of doubt enter his mind. Insurance fraud could yield higher profits than piracy. Certainly with less risk. A cunning man could collect the insurance money from Lloyds and later appear to buy a replacement ship of the same design. In fact, identical. It was simple. Change the name of the "sunken" ship and hire a new crew. A man could do a lot of shuffling among five identical ships. If a ship's officer stumbled onto the trick—well, hatchetmen were cheap and plentiful.

"Think back a little," David urged his friend. "Can you remember if Lo Te-wen ever lost any ships other than the *Shan Pa* and the *Shan Szu?*"

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Captain Huang's eyes squeezed in to contain his surprise. "You mean he didn't tell you?" The look vanished in a rush of laughter. "Judging from the expression on your face, Da-wei, I guess he didn't. *Chih pao pu chu huo!*"

"All right, philosopher," David acknowledged with a slight grin, "so you can't wrap fire in a piece of paper. Are you going to tell me the secret?"

"He lost a couple of other ships," replied Captain Huang, "but it's not a secret. The *Khedive Lion* was lost at sea with all hands. They never found a trace of her."

"How did he take it?"

"Lo? Who knows?" he answered with a shrug. "The *Khedive Lion* was covered by insurance. So was the cargo. I do know that much."

"What about the second ship? Did the same thing happen?"

Captain Huang removed his cap and wiped the sweat band with his handkerchief. "That I don't remember. It's possible. There was an insurance settlement." He put his cap back on. "You might ask Lo Te-wen."

"That I will," David said quietly.

The sounds of the *Watcher's* propeller dropped to a slow steady throb as the craft eased gently alongside the Harbor Police dock. David leaped ashore before the mooring lines were secured and went straight to the office telephone. He had to repeat the number twice before the operator rang him through to Amos Bascombe at the Shanghai Merchants Bank. It was a short conversation. Mr. Bascombe's words confirmed those of the wiry Captain of Harbor Police. Shan Freight & Steamship had been born out of the smuggling trade. If cunning was a virtue, Ming-yu had company in Mr. Lo Te-wen.

David waved goodbye to Captain Huang and walked along the waterfront toward the *Shan Erh* downstream from the station. The ship was anchored opposite the Inn of the Eight Immortals. The cargo barges he had seen earlier were gone. All the ship's cargo booms, with the exception of those at the number two hatch, had been rigged in and secured for sea. A wisp of steam rose from the cargo winches at the number two hold. They appeared to be waiting for a cargo from a barge obscured on the opposite side of the *Shan Erh*. The ship would soon be sailing out to sea.

"Sailing to what?" David asked himself, crossing Chungshan Road and away from the river. The tall buildings along the Shanghai Bund vanished from view when he entered the maze of narrow *hu-*

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tungs leading toward the Yu Yuan Gardens. The cool rich smells of the waterfront quickly yielded to the ripe odors of crowded alleys stewing in the August heat.

The Yu Yuan Garden was a place of teahouses and terraces. Beyond a small lake graced with a zigzag bridge he could see the Teahouse of the Five Virtues. David thought he detected a splinter of humor in Lo Te-wen's choice of meeting places. The teahouse featured a second floor with walls of latticed sun screens. From its shaded interior David would have a view of the approaches to the teahouse and the surrounding area back to the trees. He could see without being seen. The prospect gave David a comfortable feeling. By arriving early he would be in a position to know if Lo Te-wen was coming to the meeting alone or trailing unpleasant company in his wake. David didn't want any surprises.

He got his first one at the top of the stairs, when he paused a second to let his eyes adjust to the shadowed room.

"*Chi ko fan mo*, Da-wei?" asked a polite voice from the table behind him. "Have you had your noon rice, David?"

It was a voice he had never heard before, a voice naming him as Da-wei—the Chinese equivalent for David. He turned to face the voice. An elderly man, conservatively dressed in a wide-sleeved coat the color of ripe plums, bowed politely across the tea table. David recognized the face from Mr. Bascombe's description. He returned the bow.

"Please be seated, Da-wei," said Lo Te-wen. "I am delighted to see you came early." A faint smile appeared between the drooping edges of his white mustache. "It reinforces my faith in Mr. Bascombe's choice of an investigator."

"I am honored to meet you, Mr. Lo," David responded.

Lo Te-wen poured a cup of aromatic tea of a delicate pale yellow color. He handed it to David saying, "I ordered a few things. Please refresh yourself."

David looked at the bowls on the table. There were candied grapes, pale as light, impaled on slivers of bamboo. Another bowl contained walnut kernels imbedded in tiny glazed crab apples. A platter of small wheat cakes, their browned tops covered with sesame seeds, rested beside the teapot. David put a candied grape in his mouth. He noticed the sharp, black eyes of Lo Te-wen making their private assessment of him.

"Is it true your parents are *mei kuo jen?*" asked the ship owner.

"My adoptive parents, yes, they are American." David placed the

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empty bamboo sliver beside his cup. "My natural parents were killed by brigands during the Boxer Rebellion. The Americans found me and raised me as their own."

Lo Te-wen acknowledged the answer with a slight bow of his head. "Thank you for satisfying an old man's curiosity," he said. "As to the problem at hand, have you made any progress?"

"I went through the records you sent me. Regrettably, Mr. Lo, my conclusion cannot be substantiated with facts. I need more information."

"Then you must look elsewhere for it, Mr. Feng. The information I sent was all I have."

David shook his head. "You lost two other ships. Their files were not included. Why?"

"I didn't think they were of any importance in this matter," Mr. Lo replied.

"Murder is important. Remember the officer found in a Hangchow fish net? I think your ships were stolen and the crews murdered."

Lo Te-wen's face went rigid with shock. "What do you want to know about the two ships?"

"To start with, names, dates, and what happened."

Mr. Lo drew one end of his mustache between his thumb and forefinger. "The *Shan Liu* was lost last year. By great good fortune, and the remarkable seamanship of Captain Hogar, every man on board was saved."

"Who is Captain Hogar?"

"Senior Captain of the company," replied Mr. Lo. "He has been with me for twelve years."

"What happened to the *Shan Liu?*"

"She was driven onto the rocks by a typhoon. The ship and cargo were a total loss. You see, Mr. Feng, why I didn't mention it to you before."

"Agreed," said David with a nod of his head. "Now tell me about the *Khedive Lion*."

"I did not own the *Khedive Lion*."

For a moment David thought he had been drinking *mai-tai* instead of tea. He placed his big hands lightly on the edge of the table and leaned forward. "I was told the ship was of your fleet, Mr. Lo. If you didn't own her, who did?"

"The *Khedive Lion* was part of my fleet, yes, but it was not my ship. I had chartered the vessel from an Egyptian firm in Alexandria.

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Legally speaking, Mr. Feng, she belonged to them, and it was to them that Lloyds paid the insurance claim."

"I wish you had told me this earlier," David remarked.

"You are right, of course. I should have. But as I said, I didn't own it at the time it vanished."

"The *Khedive Lion* vanished? How?"

Mr. Lo shrugged. "Who can say? It simply disappeared four years ago, somewhere between Shanghai and Hong Kong. It went down with all hands."

"There were no survivors?"

"None."

"No wreckage found floating at sea? Nothing washed ashore?"

"Nothing, Mr. Feng."

"Just like the *Shan Pa* and the *Shan Szu?*"

Lo Te-wen loosed a string of oaths. "*Ching ti chih wa!*" he concluded. "I have seen less than a frog living at the bottom of a well! You are right. Some son of a turtle is stealing my ships."

A disquieting thought drifted across David's mind. He had been so intent weaving his own net that he had failed to detect another. If his guess was correct, the shark he sought was a master weaver himself!

"Describe the *Khedive Lion*," he said at last to Lo Te-wen.

"You saw the *Shan Erh* today?"

"Yes."

Lo Te-wen reached for the teapot. "Then you have seen the *Khedive Lion*. They were launched from the same shipyard. What is the significance?"

"Three ships have vanished without a trace—three identical ships. Do you follow me?"

"Vaguely," replied Mr. Lo.

"There are eight ships remaining in your fleet. If one more is reported lost without a trace, which one do you think it would be?"

Lo Te-wen stroked his mustache a few moments. "I see your point. It would be one of the same class, an identical ship."

David nodded. "The *Shan Erh* is anchored in the Whangpoo River. Where are the other two ships of that design?"

"The *Shan Chi* is under charter in the Australian grain trade. At the moment she is discharging wheat in Rotterdam. The *Shan Shih* is in drydock in Japan."

"So the likeliest candidate for the next vanishing act," David pointed out, "is the *Shan Erh*. Your senior captain could be of great

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help to me at this point if I could ask him a few questions. When can I meet him?"

"A month or so from now," replied to Lo Te-wen. "However, you could talk to Captain Darbney on the *Shan Erh.* I'll give you a note to him."

David accepted the note and stood up. "When can I see the file on the *Khedive Lion?"*

"Meet me at the Inn of the Eight Immortals in an hour," the ship owner replied. "I'll have it for you then."

Captain Darbney pounded his fist on the compass housing. "I'll make mincemeat out of any pirate who tries it!" He pointed to a rack of Springfield rifles and flare guns behind him on the bridge of the *Shan Erh.* "And another thing. If I had my way, Mr. Feng, I'd fix it so they would never get within boarding range. And do you know how?"

David hesitated to ask.

"Well, I'll tell you how." The shipmaster's face took on a look of hard cunning. "I'd turn this ship of mine into a Q-ship. Ever hear of Q-ships?"

"No, sir," replied David.

"The English used them against German U-boats during the war. See back there?" he asked, pointing toward the ship's stern. "I'd build a false deck-housing—complete with hinged bulkheads and phony portholes painted on—everything all realistic and believable. And you know what would be inside that phony deckhouse? Hell itself, Mr. Feng! Hell in the form of a three-inch deck gun. That would give the murdering scum the surprise of their lives!"

David didn't doubt it.

Captain Darbney, his face flushed as from a recent victory, conducted his guest to the gangway and waiting sampan. "You can take my word for it," he said in parting. "If Captain Hogar were here, he'd bear me out one hundred percent. A great seaman."

"Where is Captain Hogar? Not ill, I hope."

"Bless you, no, Mr. Feng. He's relaxing in Hong Kong. Mr. Lo grants a six-months' paid leave to the line's senior officers every four years. Company policy. I'll be taking my own as soon as this voyage is completed."

"You've been most kind and helpful, Captain Darbney. I wish you a safe voyage free of pirates."

David descended the gangway to his waiting boatman. As the

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sampan swung away from the towering rust-streaked side of the *Shan Erh*, he heard the Captain yell out, "If you find the pirates before I do, just send up a flare. I'll be glad to lend you a hand."

David responded with a wave of his arm. The sampan bobbed shoreward across the wake of a passing steamer toward the Inn of the Eight Immortals. He found Lo Te-wen seated at a table in the rear courtyard.

"I've been going through the *Khedive Lion* file," he said, handing the folder to David. "You'll also find a copy of the manifest of the *Shan Erh*'s latest cargo. How was your visit?"

"Captain Darbney has some interesting ideas."

"Did one of them include a three-inch deck gun?"

David laughed. "You've heard it before?"

"Several times." Lo Te-wen smoothed his mustache and stood up. "If you will excuse an old man, I'll say goodbye to Captain Darbney. The deck cargo is coming alongside. They'll be sailing soon."

David was left alone in the quiet courtyard. He turned his attention to the last cargo manifest of the *Khedive Lion* and settled into the lulling depths of its prosaic listings. Occasional thoughts of guns in phony deck housings flickered across his mind. Suddenly he felt a tug along his web of thoughts. Something had moved in his subconscious. He leafed back to the first page and started again. Halfway down the list the feeling came again—stronger.

With memories of the *Shan Pa* and the *Shan Szu* surging in his mind, he reached for the *Shan Erh*'s latest manifest. A net of steel strands was taking form. One single line of printed fact separated it from completion. Was it there? Unconsciously he held his breath until his finger reached line thirty-seven of the manifest.

The air rushed from his lungs. There! The net was complete. His mind drew it shut. The response was instantaneous and satisfying. It was, as Captain Darbney had phrased it, "all realistic and believable."

The shark was in his net.

In seconds he was on his feet and through the inn doorway. Minutes later he raced up the *Shan Erh*'s gangway, leaving behind him an awe-struck and exhausted boatman sagging over the sweep oar of his sampan. David ran to the ship's bridge. On the open wing of the bridge he paused to look upstream for the *Watcher*. Captain Huang was standing on deck talking to a petty officer.

David entered the bridge house, pushed past the startled owner and shipmaster, and took a flare gun from the rack behind them.

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He loaded a long cartridge into its breech and was back on the open bridge wing before either man could speak. There was a loud "ploomp." Seconds later a bright red flare burned beneath its parachute high above the Whangpoo River.

He replaced the flare gun in the rack and took down a pair of Springfield rifles.

"You'll find these more appropriate than a three-inch deck gun," he said, handing a weapon to each of the startled men. David took another rifle and worked a live round into the chamber.

Captain Darbney looked pale. "What's the meaning of this?" he blustered. "I demand an explanation!"

"You said to send up a flare if I found the pirates," David calmly replied. "Well, I've found them."

"Pirates?" scoffed Captain Darbney. "What pirates?"

David heard a metallic "snick" as Lo Te-wen released the safety on his rifle. "I refer to the pirates who plan to murder you and your crew at sea tonight. The pirates, sir, who are now on board your ship."

The morning newspaper, carefully read and neatly refolded, had been pushed to one side on the managing director's desk. The bold, red banner headlines on the "Shanghai Gazette" proclaimed:

PIRATE RING BROKEN
"LOST" SHIPS FOUND

Heavy type, boxed and centered below pictures of the *Shan Erh* and a smiling Captain Huang posed at the wheel of the *Watcher*, promised "Additional details and photographs in Section III."

Amos Bascombe, primly attired with pince-nez clamped firmly to the bridge of his nose, interrupted his visitor in the middle of a statement. The banker's voice echoed his look of surprise. "Q-ships, David? I've followed your explanation clearly enough so far. But, Q-ships?"

"That was the unexpected catalyst, sir. Captain Darbney's wartime story had enough color to intrude into my thoughts at the right moment. Considered alone, his story told me nothing. Considered in the context of cargo listings, it suddenly took on significance. Remember the deck cargoes?"

"Of course! The flood-control pumps. Crated—big as a small house!"

"There it was. If ships could use false housings to prevent destruction, why couldn't pirates use false housings to *achieve* destruction?

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I had found my first real strand. The cargo manifests confirmed it. Among all the cargoes carried by all Lo Te-wen's ships over the past four years, flood-control pumps appeared only on the manifests of the *Shan Erh* and the three missing ships. Captain Huang had characterized Ming-yu as a cunning man. He was right. Ming-yu had conceived a way to get his pirates safely aboard with the full—but unwitting—cooperation of his intended victims."

"A horrible prospect!" Amos Bascombe shuddered at the thought. "During the first night at sea they would emerge from the crate, murder the officers and crew, and take over the ship. They must have studied the plan of the ship to be able to move swiftly and accurately in the darkness."

"That's where Captain Hogar came in. As senior captain of Shan Freight & Steamship, he was familiar with every vessel in Mr. Lo's fleet. He also provided the navigational skills and other expertise required in the next step of Ming-yu's plan. The ship had to disappear."

"That is something I'd like to have seen," exclaimed Mr. Bascombe.

"No one ever did—and lived to tell. I examined the crate. It was here that Ming-yu's cunning reached new heights. The crate was built like a deck housing turned outside in. I mentioned to you that the missing ships were of composite construction?"

"You did," replied Mr. Bascombe. "Wooden deck housings rather than the usual steel."

"Inside the crate I found pre-cut and painted timbers. When assembled and mounted in place, the ship's funnel took on a new appearance. Instead of a vertical funnel it now sloped back—a raked stack, it's called. Mr. Lo's house-jack was painted over and replaced with the black diamond funnel markings of Ming-yu's shipping line. Another assembly, bolted together and added to the bow, gave the ship a new look, a look of speed. A new name, a fresh coat of paint—"

"And Ming-yu added another ship to his fleet!"

"The result of long and careful planning by a pair of scoundrels." David shifted his weight in the chair and continued. "Four years ago, while Captain Hogar was on six-months' leave, Ming-yu made him a partnership offer too profitable for a greedy man to resist. Making the necessary arrangements took time. It was close. Three weeks before Captain Hogar was due to report back for sea duty, they were ready for their first victim."

Amos Bascombe tapped the newspaper with his pince-nez. "The *Khedive Lion*," he said.

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"Which soon appeared as Ming-yu's first steamship, the *China Leopard*. They used the next four years preparing for a maximum effort. Three ships were to be taken. The *Shan Pa* disappearance came off without a hitch—the bodies of the crew were weighted and sunk. In taking the *Shan Szu* an officer was knocked overboard when struck by a hatchet-wielding pirate. Unweighted, it eventually found its way into a fisherman's net."

David paused a moment. "Speaking of nets, I found more than a shark in my own." He took two pieces of paper from his pocket and placed them on the banker's desk.

Amos Bascombe picked them up. He peered at them through his pince-nez. "It appears that both Lo Te-wen and Lloyds of London owe you a debt of gratitude."

David Feng smiled broadly. "You will note," he said "that it has been amply paid. If you will deposit those to my account, I'll be on my way."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

LOST SAINTHOOD

by JANET BLAIR DOMINICK

A fellow with Charteris acquainted
Got the notion that he could be Sainted,
But at the first bomb
He lost his aplomb
So he turned in his halo and fainted.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 581st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . The story of a nameless PI—a private eye circa now, a modern op . . .

Here is the author's dossier of himself: "Ronald S. Wilkinson is an historian of science and a former professor who discovered that reading detective fiction was a welcome respite from delivering lectures and grading examinations. Reading eventually led to serious collecting of first and early editions of his 'Golden Age' favorites. As for his own work, Dr. Wilkinson decided that as soon as he passed the mark of one hundred scholarly publications, he would try his hand at a different sort of intellectual exercise. At the age of forty-six he wrote this, his first detective story."

THE WAY IT IS

by RONALD S. WILKINSON

He was thirty-eight and had enough extra pounds so you could really notice. His name was Harry and I first met him when he tried to sell me an insurance policy. Hell, I don't know why he picked on me. I'm what they used to call a shamus, back around the war—you know, the war in Europe—and I was just playing stickball then, but I know the word shamus because I like to go around to the bookstores where they sell the used stuff and pick up old detective books and read what they wrote about PI's.

It really gives me a laugh because, well, being a PI is so different now. I mean nobody is really like that, when wherever you went there was a murder and you had to solve it. I guess those guys in the thirties had to make up a lot of things, or it wouldn't make a good story.

Well anyway, that's why I started to write this down, because of Harry and all those PI books I read. Like I said, Harry sold insurance,

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and when I told him what I did, he started talking about risks. I don't take many risks. Hell, I have to make a living and I don't like to get hurt. Harry said he never met a real PI before and he mentioned Dashiell Hammett.

Well, I know about Hammett because I bought some of his books and in one there was this part about how he was once a Pinkerton man. But he never wrote stuff about any PI's I ever heard of. Those guys were always into murder. I've had my license for ten years now and was never even near any murder. But I liked to read about it anyway because it was kind of fun, like a real cop watching Kojak on TV.

Which brings me around to Harry again. He never did sell me that policy and I don't think he wanted to after I told him what I did for a living. Anyway, I didn't need a policy. I just took one out a few months ago when I was married, and I had to pay plenty for it. But Harry was so impressed that I was a PI, well, he almost told me his life story, which wasn't much, but that's how I knew he was thirty-eight.

I didn't think I would ever see Harry again, but then he phoned me. I mean he called five times, and the fifth time I was in my office. I said yes, I remembered him.

He wanted to see me quick. And he told me, if you can believe it, that he had just killed his wife. Like I said, I never had any part in any murder, so I asked him why didn't he go to the police. He said he didn't want to go to the police and I could tell right away he thought I was one of those guys in the books who always knew just the right thing to do in cases like that. So I told Harry that if he didn't want to go to the precinct, what he should do was call his lawyer and *ask* what to do. He didn't have any lawyer. I guess Harry wouldn't have, at that.

Now in the detective books the PI is supposed to feel sorry for the guy and say sure, I'll help you out. But really I didn't give a damn about Harry and I didn't say I would help him. I decided to be at least decent to him though, I mean, what could I do? After all the guy had just killed his wife and was upset as hell about it. So I told him to come on over.

When he got to my office I didn't offer him a drink because frankly I'm on the wagon and though I cheat sometimes, I don't keep a bottle in my desk like those thirties guys did. I keep one in my car for when I really need it because mostly I work on divorces, and that takes a lot of staking out and what do you have to do when waiting

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around but smoke, read, and take a drink or two. Anyway, I got an ulcer. Had it for five years.

Now I'd been after a guy all day whose wife said he was playing around, and I would play around too if I was married to someone like her. But you know I'm in business and I needed the money, especially after marrying Helen. I thought of Helen and I really wanted to get home. My feet hurt because I had been trailing that guy on foot most of the day, without the car because the alternator was shot. I didn't mind so much about that when I thought of Helen. Married just a few months, and I smiled because *she* knew I wasn't any Hammett hero and she didn't care. She wasn't all that good-looking either and I was her second, but she loved me and that was what counted.

Well, Harry was still there and he *wasn't* smiling and I had to get rid of him. I was about to do it but there was something in his face. He was depending on me. I once had a basset hound like that.

So I asked him just what happened. He said first his wife had been seeing another guy. Then she told him about it, and she divorced him. So actually she wasn't his wife, she was his ex. Last week he found out she had married again. And he found out where she lived. So this afternoon he went there and tried to talk to her. He wanted to talk but she didn't. She said she was okay with her new husband and didn't need old Harry around any more. But that little guy, at least he had some guts. She got mad and he got mad and he whacked her with a bottle, just like that. On the head. Anyway, she was dead.

I thought about it while he was talking and I said, well, Harry, she probably got just what she deserved. I didn't half believe that because Harry was such a nothing but I really was starting to feel a little sorry for the guy. So I told Harry again he ought to get a lawyer or walk over to the precinct because they were going to get him anyway and there wasn't very much he could do about it.

I never saw such a sad look on a guy. He said okay, he would get a lawyer or something, and he walked out the door. He didn't close it, so I did. And that, I thought, was the end of Harry.

I got in the loaner car the Chevy place gave me and started to drive home. I live in Burlingame, which is somewhat south of San Francisco. As I swung onto 101 I started to think about the book I had just read and how Hammett would handle that business about Harry. I didn't know, but for the first time I had been involved in a murder. Well, not quite, I had just listened to Harry tell about it.

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The traffic was thick and as I crept along I thought about that killing and wished I could have been the Continental Op. I really did like those stories about the Continental Op.

Driving up Sanchez I forgot about the Continental Op. There were three police cars in front of our house and their lights on top were whirling around.

The sergeant told me Helen was dead. A blow to the head was the way he put it.

When I think about it, I never did ask Helen very much about her first husband, and she didn't want to talk about him at all. He was a nothing, she told me.

I guess they must have Harry by now. Yeah, they must have Harry because he wasn't very smart about it. And you know, I'll be damned if I'll ever read one of those old detective books again.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

VICARIOUSNESS

by FRANK DENTON

I'll never be a private eye.
It's probable I'll never spy.
A badge was never mine to wear.
Excitement comes from my armchair.
The greatest crimes I've ever seen
Were in the pages of *Ellery Queen*.

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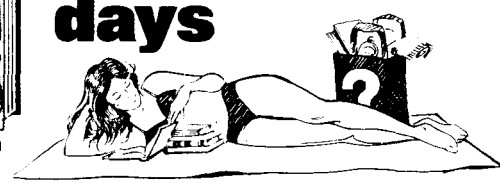
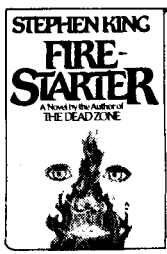
Chillers for hot summer days





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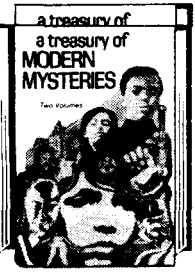

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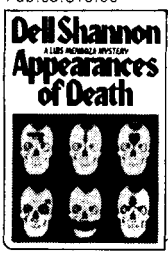

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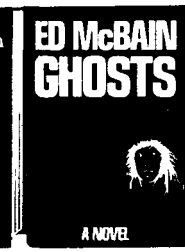

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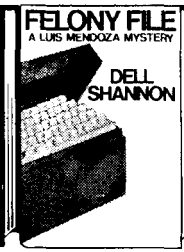

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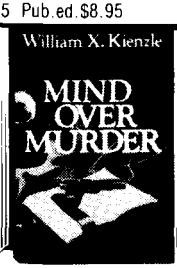

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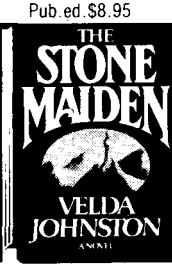

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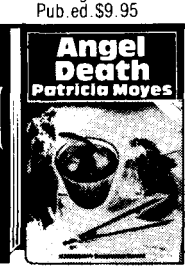

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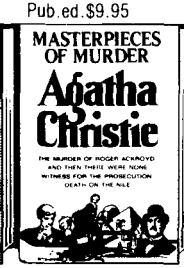

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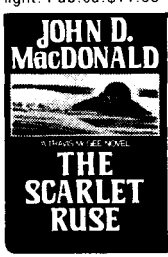
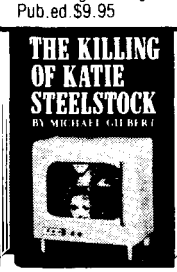


3764 *The Scarlet Ruse; The Deep Blue Good-By; Nightmare in Pink.* Comb.pub.ed.$23.85



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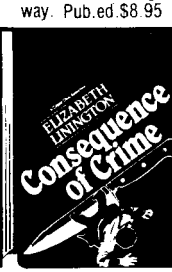

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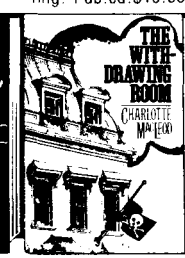
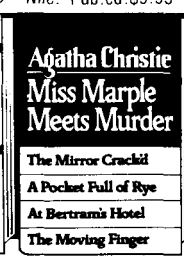


4291 Another battler in Boston from the author of *The Family Vault.* Pub.ed.$8.95



4309 *The Mirror Crack'd; A Pocketful of Rye; At Bertram's Hotel; The Moving Finger.* Comb.pub.ed.$22.40

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 582nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Yes, it looked like curtains for Willie on that hot Saturday afternoon . . .

The author, Jim Flanagan, is fifty-one, a newsman; he is married, has three children, and lives on the south shore of Long Island. He has worked for The Associated Press since 1959, as a police reporter. For exercise and relaxation he swims and sails. "In the colder months there is leaf-raking to keep the muscles toned, and ice skating and sledding with the children . . . It's a simple life, aside from the usually hectic pace of the office, but it helps me write, and for me that's a big part of what it's all about" . . .

TAPS FOR WILLIE

by JIM FLANAGAN

When Willie came to, he had no idea where he was. The room was cold—that was his immediate impression—and the back of his head hurt. When he felt it, his fingers came away tinged with blood. He was sprawled on a cold floor; he could tell it was a floor because of the feeble light from a single naked bulb in a ceiling fixture.

He was wearing slacks and a sports jacket and a short-sleeved summer shirt with a mesh weave that made the cold feel like needles against his skin. The room, what he could see of it, seemed small. He stretched his legs tentatively, then stood up and looked around. It seemed to be some sort of storage room. There were cases and cases of bottles, apparently soda bottles, stacked against one wall, and lots of other shadowy objects that he couldn't quite make out.

When his head stopped throbbing, he tried to think back. He had been sitting at the bar, waiting for the baseball game to begin and

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sipping a deliciously cold draft beer, when Mickey Ham and Benny Cheese took stools beside him. He had only been awake for about two hours and was still wearing the clothes he had slept in, even though it was two o'clock in the afternoon and the beer was breakfast. He didn't need company.

"Let's go over to a booth and talk," Mickey Ham said to him. Benny Cheese solemnly nodded agreement. They were called Ham and Cheese because they were always together, and Willie didn't like them either way, separately or together.

The saloon was getting crowded, but there was one booth left in a far corner where the TV could not be seen too well. "You go over first. We'll meet you there. And take your beer with you," Mickey Ham said.

"What did I do to you guys?" Willie said, sliding his long wiry frame off the barstool nevertheless, because when Mickey Ham and Benny Cheese told you to do something you did it. They were only minor hoods, but they had good connections and kept their noses clean with the heavies.

"We hear you were on the town with Louie and Angie last night," Mickey Ham said once they were settled at the table.

"Yeah. So what?"

"So Louie and Angie weren't around this morning, and they got a fistful of our dough. It's not like them not to come around on Saturday morning, Willie. This OTB's killing us, Willie, and we need all the bread we can get these days. We figure you know something about where they've gone to. Right?"

Willie remembered being out with Louie and Angie. So what was wrong with that? They were old buddies from the neighborhood. They still met a few times a year to talk over the old days and they'd hit a few of the old spots the night before.

"Where'd they skip to, Willie?"

"So help me," Willie said. "They didn't say anything to me about skipping. We made the rounds and I got a little bombed. That's it."

"Willie, I'll put it to you straight," Mickey Ham said. "You were with them last night, and this morning they're nowhere and our bread's nowhere. Which is where you're going to be if we don't get some answers."

Mickey Ham was talking quietly, but that didn't mean anything. Mickey Ham was tough, and if he was talking threats he was ready to make good on them.

"Let's get him out of here, Mickey," Benny Cheese said.

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"No way," Mickey Ham said. "In front of this crowd? We'll wait a while. We don't want to be seen walking out with him. Just in case, huh, Willie?"

"Mickey, I don't know anything, I swear," Willie said. "Let me get another beer, will you? I got a big head today."

"Be glad you've still got any," Mickey Ham said. "Benny, go get us a beer. We're all nice and friendly, right?"

Willie tried to remember more, but most of the night before was hazy. He remembered hitting the gin mills with Louie and Angie in the old neighborhood and then going uptown to some of the flashier spots, but the rest of the night was a blur. He remembered Louie was driving from place to place and there was a lot of small talk, but he didn't remember any mention of skipping.

He had started out with $50 and he still had about $40 left in his wallet when he awakened in the morning fully clothed in his own bed. He'd figured Louie and Angie must have sprung for the tabs, but that wasn't unusual when they were riding a good streak. If they'd said anything about skipping he didn't remember it. So he had no option at all. Even if Mickey Ham and Benny Cheese beat him to the breaking point, he couldn't tell them anything, because he didn't know anything.

"These clowns got no respect for anybody," Benny Cheese said when he got back with the beer. "It took me five minutes just to squeeze up to the bar."

"Take it easy, Benny," Mickey Ham said. "It's hot, it's Saturday, there's a big game coming on. They're thirsty. Don't take it personal. You should have the problem Willie here's got. Willie, I want to hear some talking from you. You going to cooperate or do we get nasty?"

"I'm telling you, Mickey. There's nothing," Willie said.

"Okay, Willie," Mickey Ham said. "Have it your way for now."

"We've got to get him out of here, Mickey," Benny Cheese said.

"Yeah. I'm thinking about it."

Mickey Ham was looking over the crowded bar. People were still coming in off the street, and game time was approaching. It was hot, because even with the air-conditioning on, the bar was too crowded for it to do much good and the three bartenders on duty were all but swamped.

"We can't get him out of here now," Mickey Ham said. "Somebody's bound to spot us leaving."

"So what do we do? Big Harry wants the bread."

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"I'm thinking," Mickey Ham said. He sat quietly for a couple of minutes, staring into his glass of beer, and then nodded at Benny Cheese. "We've still got a few errands to run, so we'll just have to stash him here somewhere until the game gets hot. Then we'll come back and sneak him out while everybody's glued to the tube. Take him to the men's room and wait for me."

Willie felt something hard poke into his side. "You heard him," Benny Cheese said, looking down toward the pocket where he was probably holding a gun.

Willie finished his beer in one long gulp and went with Benny Cheese. The men's room was at the end of a dark narrow corridor between the barroom and the door to the alley. That door, Willie knew, was always locked, because no one in the bar welcomed surprise visitors, and except for the doors to the men's and ladies' rooms there was only one other door, the one to the basement.

There was nowhere Willie could run. If he made a break for the basement or the ladies' room they would corner him there. If he tried to run through the bar they might be crazy enough to shoot him. Even if they weren't, they'd catch up with him sooner or later. On $40 how far could he go?

He let Benny Cheese prod him into the men's room and waited. He hoped they wouldn't hurt him too much.

Apparently, Willie thought now with some relief, they hadn't hurt him too much, at least not yet. He felt the back of his head again and there was no running blood. He remembered hearing the men's room door opening behind him and Benny Cheese before something hit him on the head, but that was all he remembered before waking up here, in the cold. Man, it was cold!

He sat on the floor again and pulled his jacket tight around his body. He figured he must be somewhere in the basement, but where? He looked around the room again and finally made out what appeared to be a door in one wall. Without much hope he got up and walked over to it. There wasn't even a suggestion of a handle or a knob and he figured it must be one of those self-closing doors that couldn't be opened from the inside.

He examined the sides and found a tiny opening between the end of the wall and what probably would be the swinging end of the door.

Maybe he could pry it open, but with what? And was there time? He had no idea how long he had been out or whether the ball game was over or when Mickey Ham and Benny Cheese would return.

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Nevertheless, he had to try. If he didn't freeze to death, which seemed likely, he'd probably be beaten to death. He started to go through his pockets, out of desperation, even though he was sure he carried nothing strong enough to pry open the door. He checked his slacks pockets, found nothing, and started going through his jacket pockets. Some loose change, a comb, a matchbook, the key to his rented room, an envelope in his inside breast pocket.

An envelope? He studied it. It was white, legal size, with nothing written on it. He took it over to the middle of the room, held it up as far as he could toward the light, and opened it. The envelope contained a long sheet of paper, folded, and a packet of bills. There was a $100 bill on top, and there were nine of the same below it. $1000. On the paper was a note, addressed to him. "Dear Willie," it said. "For old times. Goodbye. Good luck. Louie and Angie."

So they had skipped. Well, at least they had left him something besides trouble with Mickey Ham and Benny Cheese. $1000. A fortune. A one-way ticket out of town, if he could get out of this freezing basement. He put the note and the bills back into the envelope and returned them to his pocket.

His teeth were beginning to chatter and his hands were trembling. He forced himself to start moving around the room. He double checked the door and looked over the stacked cases, which turned out to hold bottles of club soda, ginger ale, and tonic water. The shadowy objects were nothing but old storage boxes, broken tables and chairs, and a huge freezerlike contraption that turned out to be an icemaker, a reserve one, probably, because he knew there was one upstairs.

Something was starting to click in his head. Club soda, tonic water, an icemaker. Practically everything except beer. Where was the beer?

He looked back along the wall at the end of the row of stacked cases and then he saw it—another door, with a knob. He opened it, and as he did a light came on inside another little room and he saw the kegs of beer, the glorious, cold, thirst-quenching kegs of beer, and for the first time that day he smiled. He knew exactly where he was. He was in nothing less than the nerve center of the saloon on a hot Saturday baseball afternoon, and what he saw in front of him was nothing less than his way out.

He looked lovingly at the pipes leading up from the kegs to the barroom, felt a fleeting twinge of guilt for what he was about to do

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to the beer-guzzling baseball fans upstairs, and shut off every tap he could find.

Willie was hugging the wall in a dark corner of the storage room, wondering how long it would take for the beer to sputter out at the bar, when the door sprang open and two bartenders dashed in.

"I don't believe it!" one of them said. "One of the hottest days of the year. Two out and three men on in the bottom of the seventh and the beer runs out! Wedge that door open and let's check the taps."

Willie waited until he was satisfied that both bartenders were occupied in the beer room and slipped out the door, taking care to leave it wedged open for them.

His first impulse was to run, but would that solve anything? For all he knew, Mickey Ham and Benny Cheese might come walking in while he was running out and they'd grab him upstairs. In any event, when they did come back they'd see in an instant that he was gone and the word would go out that he was among the missing too. He decided he had to get them before they could get him.

He looked around for a place to hide and found a dark space behind the basement stairs. While he waited for the bartenders to check things out, he pictured the storage room in his mind. The icemaker, the stacks of cases, the door to the beer room. He had almost missed seeing the door to the beer room because of the cases stacked beside it. Suppose there had been no beer room? No beer room, no way out.

By the time the bartenders reappeared at the door, he had decided what he was going to do. He watched quietly while they removed the wedge, left it just inside the door, and started back upstairs.

"I'll never figure out how those taps got turned off," one bartender was telling the other. "But no sweat. There's enough beer tapped in there to hold us till Tuesday."

Till Tuesday. Now there's a chilling prospect, Willie couldn't help thinking as he left his hiding place, reopened the storage-room door, and carefully replaced the wedge to keep the door open.

As he headed for the stacks of cases, the crowd upstairs was sounding more and more excited, as though things were happening fast in the game, and he didn't know how much time he would have to set up Mickey Ham and Benny Cheese. He attacked the heavy cases, removing them one by one from the neat stacks and placing them in front of the door to the beer room.

When he had completely covered every inch of the door, he stepped

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back to survey his work. Not a trace of the door was visible behind the cases. It was as though the door did not exist. He left the storage room, let the door swing shut behind him, and went back to his niche behind the basement stairs. In the relative comfort of the outer basement, he waited for Mickey Ham and Benny Cheese to return to do whatever it was they intended to do to him.

Sudden pandemonium upstairs told him the game was in its final stage and he wouldn't have long to wait. Amid the tumult of shouts and whistles he heard footsteps clattering down the stairs. Mickey Ham reached the bottom first and opened the storage-room door.

"Hold this thing open again, Benny, while I go drag him out, if he's still breathing," Mickey Ham said. "Man, it's cold in here!"

They were the last words Willie heard him utter, and they were satisfying. But not half so satisfying as the expression on Benny Cheese's face when he saw Willie spring up in front of him as he held the door ajar. The transition from wild disbelief to stark terror was a thing of beauty, and Willie savored it for an instant before he slammed the door shut on both of them, slamming with all the strength at his command.

It was going to be a good weekend, Willie thought as he patted the envelope in his breast pocket and hurried upstairs to catch the end of the game.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

CRIME FICTION 1950–1975: As promised some issues back, here are more details on Garland Publishing's forthcoming fifty-volume set of modern American and British mystery classics, titled *Crime Fiction 1950–1975* and edited by Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor. There have been numerous lists and sets of mystery classics covering the pre-1950 years (including Barzun and Taylor's first Garland series five years ago), but this is the first I know to concentrate on the modern mystery. As such, the choices are especially interesting.

Consisting of forty-nine novels and an anthology of the period's best short stories, *Crime Fiction 1950–1975* includes a number of British novels never before published in America, as well as books by most of today's leading mystery writers. Some of the high points are Fredric Brown's *The Deep End,* Amanda Cross's *In the Last Analysis,* Elizabeth Daly's *Death and Letters,* Thomas B. Dewey's *A Sad Song Singing,* Stanley Ellin's *The Key to Nicholas Street,* Dick Francis's *Dead Cert,* Edward Grierson's *The Second Man,* Tony Hillerman's *The Fly on the Wall,* Michael Innes's *One Man Show,* P. D. James's *Cover Her Face,* Emma Lathen's *Murder Makes the Wheels Go 'Round,* John D. MacDonald's *Dead Low Tide,* J. J. Marric's *Gideon's River,* Ruth Rendell's *A New Lease of Death,* Julian Symons's *The Narrowing Circle,* Josephine Tey's *The Singing Sands,* and Hillary Waugh's *The Missing Man.*

The hardbound set will be published in December or January, at an introductory price of $446.50 for prepaid orders received before December 1st. The fifty volumes are also available individually. A catalog and full details may be obtained from Garland Publishing, Inc., 136 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

AWARD WINNERS: This year's Edgar winners, announced by Mystery Writers of America at its annual dinner on June 12th, include: Best Novel—*Whip Hand* by Dick Francis (Harper & Row), Best First Novel—*The Watcher* by Kaye Nolte Smith (Coward McCann), Best Short Story— "Horn Man" by Clark Howard (*EQMM,* June 2, 1980), Best Biography and Criticism—*20th Century Crime and Mystery Writers,* John

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M. Reilly, editor (St. Martin's), Best Paperback Novel—*Public Murder* by Bill Grange (Jove), Best Juvenile—*The Séance* by Joan Lowery Nixon (Harcourt Brace). MWA's Grand Master Award went to Stanley Ellin.

In London the Crime Writers Association awarded its Gold Dagger to *The Murder of the Maharajah* by H. R. F. Keating (Collins), its Silver Dagger to *Monk's Hood* by Ellis Peters (Macmillan), the John Creasey Memorial Award to *Dupe* by Liza Cody (Collins), and the Gold Dagger for nonfiction to *Conspiracy* by Anthony Summers (Gollancz). A special award went to Elizabeth Ferrars (E. X. Ferrars) on the publication of her 50th book.

BOUCHERCON XII: Though it's still midsummer, it's not too soon to be making plans for Bouchercon XII. The annual convention of mystery writers and fans will be held this year at the Marc Plaza Hotel, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on October 9–11, directed by co-chairpersons Mary Ann Grochowski and Beverly De Weese. Guest of Honor will be Helen McCloy, and the preliminary list of speakers and panelists includes Jon L. Breen, Gene De Weese, Robert Edward Eckels, Rosemary Gatenby, Joe L. Hensley, Edward D. Hoch, Stuart Kaminsky, John Lutz, Francis M. Nevins, Jr., Otto Penzler, Bill Pronzini, Robert J. Randisi, Ross Spencer, Chris Steinbrunner, and Wilson Tucker.

Registration is $15.00 for all three days, and checks may be sent to Bouchercon XII, 2009 S. 93rd Street, West Allis, WI 53227.

JDM BIBLIOGRAPHY: Mystery fans will be pleased to learn of *A Bibliography of the Published Work of John D. MacDonald* by Jean and Walter Shine. The 209-page spiral-bound book includes a biographical essay and several photographs, and not only shows a vast knowledge of MacDonald's writing but also an appreciation of his importance to the current mystery scene. Cost is $9.00 per copy, from Patrons of the UF Libraries, 217 Library West, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

CHRISTIE IN FRANCE: For collectors and those who read French, a new biography, *Agatha Christie, "Duchesse de la Mort"* by Francois Riviere, has just been published by Editions du Seuil, 27 rue Jacob, Paris. The paperback volume includes photographs of Christie and a brief bibliography of her works.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Julian Symons examines seven of crime fiction's greatest sleuths in *The Great Detectives,* a fall book from Abrams. The detectives covered are Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, Inspector Maigret, Ellery Queen, Nero Wolfe, and Philip Marlowe. The book includes more than seventy illustrations by Tom Adams, many in full color.

Robert Bloch has completed work on a sequel to *Psycho,* his most famous novel. In *Psycho II,* the original killer escapes from a mental hospital and goes on the prowl again.

Mystery fans saddened by the death of Robert L. Fish last February can look forward to a final Fish novel, *Rough Diamond,* coming from Doubleday this winter.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Long before it was fashionable, she personified the independent self-reliant woman. So telegraphed President Reagan to Barbara Stanwyck on the occasion of the recent Film Society of Lincoln Center's tribute to her. But the star has demonstrated more than just a will of iron across fifty years on screen. In many of Stanwyck's more than eighty films she was unscrupulous, unregenerate, stalking the shadowy alleys of the film *noir*, a black widow or scarlet temptress weaving a crime of passion. Indeed, so many of her films, though by no means all, have been squarely in our genre that mystery-movie fans should give her a deserved salute as well.

Even in her lighter films Stanwyck played roles with larcenous touches. As the go-getting reporter in *Meet John Doe* it was she who fabricated the non-existent "John Doe" loser, threatening to commit suicide on Christmas Eve, when an unwary Gary Cooper brought her to life. In *The Mad Miss Manton* she was a frivolous society girl nobody believed when she declared she'd seen a murder—and later tangled with the killer in an abandoned subway tunnel. She was a shipboard society swindler as *The Lady Eve*, mesmerizing Henry Fonda with her philosophy of women: "The best ones aren't as good as you probably think they are, and the bad ones aren't as bad—not nearly as bad."

But she was at her flashiest, cheeriest best as the divine Dixie in *Lady of Burlesque* (adapted from Gypsy Rose Lee's *G-String Murders*), bumping and grinding her way through an intricate whodunit. ("Listen, brother/I've got a mother/old and grey/whom I support this way/four shows a day.") Another of her lyrics deals with an occupational police hazard. "Time was/ crime was/ stealing some dough./ Now it's improper attire./ Here comes the Black Ma-ri-a."

Stanwyck never won an Academy Award, but from the start, when Frank Capra cast her in *Ladies of Leisure* in 1930—a melodrama about golddiggers on gambling yachts ("Take a good look. It's free.")—she displayed a lasting quality of hard allure. "There were dozens of starlets who could have played the tramp," Capra recalled at the Lincoln Center salute, "but it took Stanwyck to make us *care* for the girl." She went on to play the questionable faith healer in *The Miracle Woman*, a *Night Nurse* assigned to a mysterious house, a convict in *Ladies They Talk About*. In *Flesh and Fantasy*, an anthology film, she was in the longest of the three stories—a woman whose love for a circus aerialist was foreshadowed.

One always knew that the thrillers in which Stanwyck starred were good. In *Cry Wolf*—amid luxurious circumstances—she coped with hereditary family insanity. Murderous family problems of another sort threatened

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her in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls.* In *The File on Thelma Jordan* she became clandestinely involved with an assistant district attorney while accused of murder. *No Man of Her Own* had her assume the identity of a dead fellow passenger in a train crash only to be blackmailed later—a film based on the William Irish novel, *I Married a Dead Man.* And she was at the center of the sinister household Edgar Allan Poe entered in *The Man with the Cloak*—from a story by John Dickson Carr.

Stanwyck could be vulnerable too, but not often. She portrayed a classic victim in the screen version of Lucille Fletcher's radio drama, *Sorry, Wrong Number.* The feature film—stretched out from the *Suspense* show—gave her nearly an hour and a half of torment before, a bedridden neurotic, she finally realizes the telephone conversation about a killing she overhears concerns her personally.

But at murder she was spectacular. In *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* we know she has already disposed of her aunt in childhood and is about to kill again. ("*Now*, Sam, do it *now*. Set me free. Set us *both* free.") She was always luring men into dark deeds, the quintessential femme fatale. No one better than she could underscore the implications of a line like "I only *wanted* him dead." The implication being "but you did it." It's from one of the great crime films of all time, Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity,* with Raymond Chandler scripting from James M. Cain. In it Fred MacMurray knows she's capable of the darkest murder because she's been seen trying on a black hat long before anyone thinks of a funeral. "We're in this together," she tells him—("Like on a trolley car to the cemetery," MacMurray retorts later)—"I'm rotten to the heart."

Not ever win an Academy Award? No matter. She's won *our* hearts. Throughout five decades of movie melodramatics, Barbara Stanwyck has been some tough cookie—but made with the finest ingredients, and undeniably tasty.

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INTERVIEW: MICHAEL GILBERT (1)

This is the first part of an interview that will be concluded in the next issue.

EQMN: Your parents were writers and your daughter Harriett is a mystery writer. Were you encouraged to write by your parents? Did you give Harriett a special nudge in that direction?

GILBERT: No to both questions. The only advice I ever gave Harriett was to leave out all her adverbs.

EQMN: You have five daughters and two sons. Did you grow up in a large family?

GILBERT: I have three sisters, all still alive and all bossy.

EQMN: Joan Kahn, your long-time editor in the U.S., says you are "a gentleman who cares, and totally disciplined." To what influences do you attribute these qualities?

GILBERT: Without necessarily accepting this high compliment, I would

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say that six years in the wartime army was, marginally, the operative influence.

EQMN: What was your first professional story?

GILBERT: My first published short story was written in 1925 for the school magazine. It was a whodunit. I was thirteen.

EQMN: You are one of the founders of the Crime Writers Association in England. How did that come about?

GILBERT: Truly, I think as a counterblast to the Detection Club. It is, of course, much more than that now.

EQMN: Your uncle, Maurice Gwyer, who was Lord Chief Justice of India, influenced you to study law. You're a partner in the law firm of Trower, Still & Keeling. How do you manage to put in a normal day's work there and to write as much as you do?

GILBERT: I explained this once in immortal verse, which begins—

"You are old, Michael Gilbert, your years are three score/ Your hair has become very white./ You spend all your days in pursuit of the law/ Pray how do you manage to write?"

"In my youth," said the sage, "I was ardent and keen/ And drove myself nearly insane/ But now I've devised a more restful routine/ I write all my books on the train."

EQMN: You've published 20 novels, over 300 short stories, and have written numerous plays for the London stage, radio, and television, as well as articles and books on the law and fact crime. What are some of the greatest satisfactions you've derived from your writing?

GILBERT: Money—but there are drawbacks as well. Among the crosses which an author bears, until and unless he becomes as well known as Agatha Christie, the heaviest is the bright young thing who is introduced to you at a dinner party, told your name, and informed that you write. When she says, with an engaging smile, "And do you write under your own name, Mr. Gilbert?" I regret that I have no strychnine to put in her drink.

EQMN: Do you have any interests outside of your work?

GILBERT: Watching cricket, playing bridge. Reading—mostly biography and history.

EQMN: How do you fit them into your day?

GILBERT: My weekends are free for all of them. Also my train journeys home. I only write on the way out.

EQMN: How important is sleep to you?

GILBERT: Essential.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Though most of the late C. P. Snow's novels are not detective fiction, he both began and ended his career in the genre. Separated by 47 years, the two novels illustrate as well as any Julian Symons' theory of the detective story's development into the crime novel. Both are currently available in new reprint editions.

Death Under Sail (Scribners, $10.95), first published in 1932, is a prize example of the formal detective story of its era, including a closed circle of suspects, fair-play clueing, occasional footnotes, a map and a floorplan, and the requisite master sleuth in Finbow. *A Coat of Varnish* (Scribners, $5.95), nominated for an Edgar as one of the best novels of 1979, is also a whodunit, but a much more serious statement about contemporary life and justice is intended, and any attempt at surprise in the choice of culprit is sacrificed in favor of driving home the theme. (For much of the book's length, I had the feeling Snow was planning to spring an Agatha Christie-like stunt solution. Whether this impression was given intentionally I don't know, but the finish I anticipated would have made for a poorer book.)

Both are good novels, and to say one is better than the other would be to make an apples-or-oranges comparison. It seems safe to say, though, that *Death Under Sail* ranks higher among the artificial puzzles of the Thirties than *A Coat of Varnish* among the realistic police novels of the Seventies.

*** Martin Cruz Smith: *Gorky Park,* Random House, $13.95. This book is in many ways a milestone. It marks a bestselling breakthrough in the career of a prolific mystery writer in hard and (mostly) soft covers. It presents an even-handed view of Soviet society (and of American society from a Soviet point of view) that will wholly satisfy no ideologue. Moscow homicide detective Arkady Renko, a half-hearted Communist Party member, is the hero, and an American capitalist is the villain. Though detection takes a back seat to background and characterization, there are some fascinating insights into Soviet police work.

*** Ross Thomas: *The Mordida Man,* Simon and Schuster, $13.95. The advent of a new administration in Washington doesn't mean we've seen our last President's-brother-and-the-Libyans book. The kidnaped Bingo McKay, though, resembles Billy Carter only superficially. The intricate plot is not one of Thomas's very best, but his ironical, detached style, one of the most graceful and readable in the field, carries the day.

*** Roderic Jeffries: *Just Deserts,* St. Martin's, $9.95. Inspector Enrique Alvarez investigates the murder of a middle-aged English spinster living in Mallorca. Along with the traditional whodunit, the author gives a nice sense of the cultural conflict between the British residents and

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their Spanish hosts. The ending presents a new variation on a standard mystery denouement. A prolific and reliable pro, Jeffries is also known as Jeffrey Ashford, Peter Alding, and Roderic Graeme.

*** Richard Barth: *A Ragged Plot,* Dial Press, $10.95. The second case for senior citizen sleuth Margaret Binyon centers on an odd assortment of street people working a community garden on New York City's west side. It's a pleasant and neatly plotted tale, much better than Barth's overrated debut, *The Rag Bag Clan.* The behavior of the police is quite unlikely, though—dumb cops in the grand tradition, they are run through hoops by an amateur.

*** Hugh Pentecost: *Murder in Luxury,* Dodd, Mead, $8.95. The latest Pierre Chambrun mystery is typical of the series in title, pace, and plot development. The puzzle-making is less devious than Pentecost's best, but the finale is fine.

** Jon Godden: *In Her Garden,* Knopf, $10.95. This gracefully written English village novel starts as pure suspense along the *Kind Lady* lines and finishes a regrettably transparent whodunit. Well done but not very substantial.

** William X. Kienzle: *Mind Over Murder,* Andrews and McMeel, $9.95. The first half of the third Father Koesler case—before the promised disappearance of the widely hated head of Detroit's Catholic marriage tribunal takes place—seems a vast improvement over his debut, almost on the Rabbi Small level in telling, characterization, and theological interest. Alas, the multiple daydreams of the second half cause the book to lose impetus and credibility en route to a disappointing and easily forecast solution.

** Dennis Wheatley and J. G. Links: *The Malinsay Massacre,* Rutledge Press, $17.95. First published in Britain in 1938, this "crime dossier" novel here appears in its first American edition.

Told in the form of letters, maps, photographs, newspaper clippings, and bound-in clues, these documentaries are admittedly not true novels, though they include as much characterization as many Thirties detective stories. This one, set in 1899 and offering more of a country house than a police-procedural flavor, offers a decent example of Golden Age puzzle-making, complete with multiple solutions.

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"Q"

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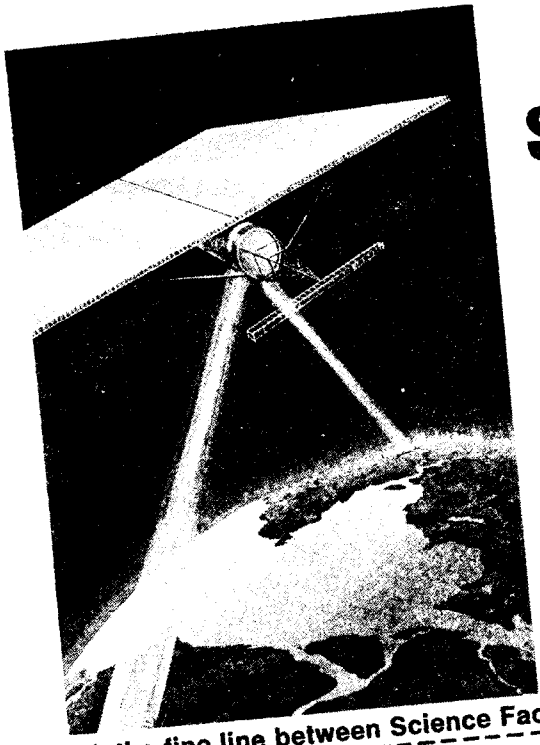

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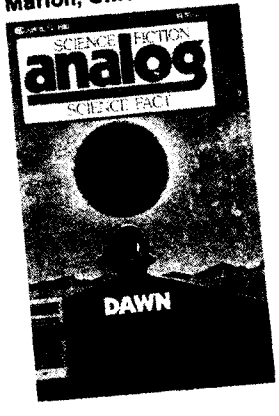

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"The stage is perfectly set for the last act . . ."

CHANCE FOR FREEDOM

by BRYCE WALTON

Evans slipped along the cold wall of Ward 7, quiet as dust in his canvas shoes. Twelve paces left of Big Ricci, the attendant, he leaned and waited. Still, unobtrusive as a mannikin, hardly daring to breathe out loud, face deadpan that had once sparked comparison with Paul Newman and Robert Redford, he waited as he had been waiting through he no longer remembered how many dead and hanging days for Big Ricci to acknowledge his presence. Or his existence.

Since whenever Big Ricci said, "Keep on being a good boy, Bird Dog, and you'll get to see Doc Weiss."

Evans heard a whir of fear start up in his head. Only an okay from Dr. Weiss could get you out of this final pitstop. Why did Big Ricci keep withholding Dr. Weiss, keep punishing? Evans was good now. He didn't "mess up" any more. He was no longer arrogant with claims of not belonging here, of being a "peacock trapped in a turkey pen." He no longer pestered and nagged to see Dr. Weiss.

He had *learned.* He had been kicked in the shins, put in the mattress room, locked in an isolation cell, tied up in a camisole, force-fed cold mush without salt, been subjected to ridicule and vicious ribbing. He was *good.* He knew his place. Why hadn't he been permitted to see Dr. Weiss?

He didn't sniff and whine any more, so why did Big Ricci still call him—

"Bird Dog."

Big Ricci loomed over him, biceps and chest swelling his stained T-shirt, scorn and malice in his pouched little eyes, that always-smile seeming wired to his thick face like a booby trap.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Ricci," Evans said with slow care, moving nothing but his lips.

"You still want to see Doc Weiss?"

A vein squirmed in Evans' forehead. A leg muscle jerked under

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his green smock. The room blurred and Big Ricci's other charges had the slow wavery look of shapes moving under the sea: the mutes sitting and staring in a row, Conners pacing with tormented grunting and emanating the odor of death, Fred leaping and cavorting with excess energy and delusions of being a ballet dancer, The Four marching tirelessly counterclockwise chanting military commands, Barlow hearing voices and scribbling answers on the wall with his forefinger, and every hour on the hour the guy up in his second-floor cage giving out one of his *yoo-yoo-yooling* giant baby cries.

He remembered O'Keefe on a long-ago night of the full moon, kicking loose that high wire mesh window and escaping like an agile ape out of Edgar Allan Poe. Remembered him dragged back to the shock room where they murdered his brain.

Please, he had to see Dr. Weiss. He had to see him once, that was all, to clear himself and fly away out of this hell.

"If it isn't an inconvenience, Mr. Ricci," he said carefully. "If you can spare the time."

"It's Doc Weiss who's short on time." Big Ricci waggled a fat carrot finger. "And he don't like to be kept waiting."

They went down white corridors cold with fluorescent light, down cold iron stairs, and Big Ricci opened a white door and motioned Evans in. Evans was startled by the clang-snap-lock of the door behind him, and by the room's unexpected impact.

The anticipated warm, comforting paneled room with books was an ascetic cubicle with bare walls, steel filing cabinet, steel desk with steel armless chair before it, all battleship-gray. Behind the desk squatted a fat gray man in a gray jacket with a bald pear-shaped head, dour inflexible face, and clouded, slightly bulging eyes. Erased was Evans' mental image of a tanned man smoking a pipe, wearing a tweedy jacket and perhaps a spade beard.

But as veteran adapter to stage fright, Evans rallied, took two steps downstage center. "Dr. Weiss, I want to thank you for—"

"Ah—" Dr. Weiss's eyes, like glass in a doll's face, rolled down to focus on a notepad, the sole item on the steel-topped desk. "Evans?"

"Yes, Dr. Weiss. Cliff Evans."

"The actor?"

Evans nodded, a smile lighting his face.

"Please sit down, Mr. Evans."

Evans sat down. Dr. Weiss looked at him. Until Evans heard his own voice saying from far away, "I have quite a lot to tell you, by way of explanation. Why my being here is a mistake, the result of

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a miscalculation. Oh, not yours, Dr. Weiss. Not the institution's error. But mine. You see—" He stopped and rubbed at his throat.

"Just relax," said Dr. Weiss. "Speak freely." He checked his wristwatch. "I can give you twenty, thirty minutes."

Evans began. After years of rehearsal it was boiled down to essential summary in his brain.

The theater had been his whole life, he wanted to make that clear. Nothing else had ever really meant anything. He'd always been an actor. During high school, then at Iowa University where he was granted a scholarship to the Stanislavski Academy of Dramatic Art in New York City, the most prestigious of all drama schools, founded by disciples of the great Constantin Stanislavski himself. Evans had graduated with honor, gone on for years studying, working, living in roach-pads, waiting on tables, until he began to make it in off-Broadway plays, then Broadway with good notices. Until he was all set to do Shakespeare in the Park. Hamlet—

But he had moved in with Marcia, and she was pregnant. She cried a lot. She was sweet, fragile, so dependent. So he thought. So she led him to believe. He felt so guilty, so responsible. The theater offered no security. Being the man, the provider, he had to give up his career.

So they were married and it was goodbye Broadway, hello slow and dusty death in Paw Paw, Illinois, where he was set up in her Daddy's health-food business peddling Sun-Smacks.

Only it was sixteen years later before he understood how he was dying, how Marcia had been murdering him.

"Murdering you?" said Dr. Weiss.

Evans knew the term was suspect as paranoia or as simple histrionic exaggeration. He had to make perfectly clear that it was neither.

How he'd worked through the years, eighteen, twenty hours a day. No identification with the enterprise, no real commitment or gratification. But acting skills made him a top salesman, then division chief, then head of the marketing department, then executive, and so on. Not that all his efforts were, or could ever be, enough for Marcia, their son Ronnie, the family, and Sun-Smacks.

Sixteen years a programmed zombie, a slave in harness, a sleepwalker.

Then he began to wake up. He began to see, vaguely and dreamlike at first, what she had done to him, how she had used him. She had never been interested in the theater or his career in it; that had

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been a lie, pretense, a way of hooking him. That had been her only ambition—to get a man. No, not a man. Not even a human being. But a provider, a living, a certain ever-expanding standard of living. At twenty-four, before ever having had a chance to live and realize his real self, he began to die.

How she had exploited his macho, woman-on-a-pedestal hangup, tapped his guilt and sense of responsibility toward frail woman. Made her love and Ronnie a gift, a sacrifice for protection and support.

He saw how he had been victimized, made to play a false role, his real self destroyed in identity-suicide. Stress—ulcers, high blood pressure, chest pains.

Rage, then fear. Torn between rebellion and guilt, he came home nights wishing she'd been killed in an auto accident or any way at all that would solve his problem without guilt. Until there was no more guilt, but only the raging fury and—

Dr. Weiss coughed. "How do you account for this release from conflict? This total raging return to self?"

A song? Yes, he remembered that night boozing, that song by Rod McKuen. *One day the man I used to know will come along and bid me go.*

He worked up the courage to tell her he had to go and why. She cried and pleaded, drank and put on more weight. While her lawyer gave him the cold truth behind the mask. Separation? Divorce? Forget it. He'd be stuck with child support and alimony *en extremis*. He would have to plug along in harness until dropped by an obligatory heart attack or whatever. Refuse to pay and go to prison? Run away, try to hide his identity? Why, when only a return to the theater could salvage whatever remained of the man he used to be, or should have been.

They left him only one way out. Over her dead body.

Dr. Weiss looked at him with professional detachment. There *might* have been a tiny frown beneath the skin. Evans, hip to officious opinion that a madman can see only one way out, no options, felt sweat smarting his eyelids, and said quickly, "I tried every other way, but with Marcia there was no compromise with greed. I acted in self-defense. It was Marcia or me. And of course I had to get away with it. There wouldn't be any point in exchanging one life sentence for another."

"The perfect crime, Mr. Evans?"

"Yes. But I never considered killing in self-defense a crime. Never

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saw it as murder. And I made damned sure no one else ever could either . . ."

A year and a half, programming, developing the scenario, rehearsing, carrying through to a successful and brilliant denouement. But first there was the research. An actor comes prepared.

Source books. Lloyd Aldrin's *Law and Hidden Homicide*. Thane Berti's *Murder by Experts*. Law books. Case books. So many ingenious ways to get away with murder. He chose the one that demanded the talents of a skilled actor, and one also indigenous to his circumstance.

Suicide. Most men who opt for self-destruct, directly or indirectly, do so because of depression resulting from failure as husband-provider, failure in business. He was all set up.

His methods were pure Stanislavski. Read everything on suicidal depression. Concentrate on character. Assume it. Imagine it in scene after possible scene. See the inner life, wait until it awakens proper feeling, imagine it being depressed. Listen to depression speak.

Begin at the Sun-Smacks company. The program of breakdown. Paranoid tendencies acted out. Reports withheld at corporate meetings. Be secretive, so secretive that you make important business trips and never tell your staff where you're going, or what you're doing. Pit employees against each other. Talk behind their backs. Be fearful and erratic.

Talk endlessly to whoever will listen about your frustrated life with Marcia. Always with tears of guilt, self-hate, and self-recrimination. Sink deeper into depression. Express dissatisfaction with your achievements, total disappointment with yourself. Although everyone knows you're the quintessential workaholic, be self-critical, cry that you're a complete failure, finished.

The home scenario. Progressive guilt and black despair. Failure to go to the office. Pretense of being ashamed you can't work. Keep the car locked in the garage so the neighbors won't know you're goofing off and copping out on family and Sun-Smacks. Don't answer the phone or door, keep window shades drawn. Always appear to be boozing, moping, crying in hopeless despair.

Buy the gun, a .32 Colt revolver. Let Marcia find you fondling it in your den. Make sure also that the hired help—the maid, the gardener, the cook, and especially Gloria the cleaning woman —witness you with the gun and various other poses of planned suicide. For Gloria is to be the star witness, vital to the success of your scenario.

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Make several calls to ALIVE. That's Action, Lean, Improve, Vital, and Encouragement, a suicide prevention clinic fielding calls from morbid depressives. And pay a few token calls on the company's clinical psychologist, Dr. Kessler.

And you stage a series of intensely realistic and effective suicide attempts. Four in all. Knowing Marcia will note them in her diary along with on-going accounts of all your other aberrant behavior. She finds you lying in the den, the gas turned on. She finds you stunned by a gunshot that only grazed your scalp. Finds you unconscious beside an emptied barbiturate bottle. Finds you bleeding and semi-conscious near the wrecked Porsche.

And what a crazy-bind you have poor Marcia in. She can't report your self-destructive proclivities. Oh, she's of a mind to at first, until you explain, for her own benefit, about the life-insurance policy with double indemnity and her as beneficiary. Any hint of your being suicidal invalidates the payoff.

And all the time you're on your knees to her, crying out your need for her, how only she can save you now. If you're salvageable. Or worth any further effort.

Everything's set. Nothing can go wrong. And appropriately enough it's spring, season of rebirth, time of renewal. Three thirty in the afternoon. The stage is perfectly set for the last act . . .

Evans saw himself there as in a dream, brooding in his den, the Colt revolver waiting on his desk while he sipped Jack Daniels on the rocks. A picture of superb self-loathing and defeat, a broken man, a failure at marriage and job, a morbid depressive with a drinking problem, a drinking wife, and a kid into hard drugs.

His suicide note there beside the gun: "Dearest Marcia. This will be my last letter to you. I'm going to kill myself. I'm just one of those jokers who can't make good. It'll be hard on you and Ronnie for a while, but then you'll be better off. It's all my fault, as most everything is that's ever gone wrong. All I can say is I'm sorry and wish I could make it up to you."

Nothing can go wrong. And part of what makes it foolproof is what he hates most about that house, what has made it a restricting tomb—its absolute rigid predictability. He knows Marcia is two doors down the hall with her diary and another Martini. And he knows that Gloria, on her faithful rounds with vacuum and duster, will reach his den in precisely five minutes.

And there's her obligatory knock. Three of them, then she's open-

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ing the dcor without a sanctioning response. He isn't usually here at this hour. This time he's full of surprises.

As she comes in, lean and long-necked and withered as a stork, he stands and raises the gun to his head. Her scream is dry, half-strangled, rusty from disuse. She trots at him waving her duster as if shooing flies. "No, no, Mr. Evans. It's a sin!"

"Good riddance of bad rubbish," he shouts, flourishing the gun. And in case Marcia hasn't heard Gloria's scream, he fires a signal shot past his toupee, dropping chunks of lath and plaster.

Marcia rushes in on cue, amazingly responsive considering her two hundred pounds and eight hours of booze. She lunges over him, flailing for the gun, wrenching and grasping, manages to pull his arm down with straining power born of desperate greed.

Just as Evans pulls the trigger.

Blowing her brains out instead of his.

He still sees her there with no face, often in dreams, always like a giant white doll leaking liquid sawdust.

And while Gloria, his prize witness, is observing every nuance, he's on his knees sobbing out his hopeless guilt . . .

Evans rubbed at his mouth. He heard echoes as if he'd been talking too loud, too fast. His upper lip was slick with sweat. And he could feel his heart like a fist beating at his chest.

"Beautiful," said Dr. Weiss. "A really beautiful *mise-en-scène*."

Evans smiled. "No charge of murder of course. No thought of murder. So many witnesses to my symptoms of morbid depression. Gloria with her on-hand account of my accidental sacrifice of Marcia while trying to erase myself.

"There's something called 'the law of transferred malice' in most states. Means that anyone who kills another while trying to kill himself is guilty of murder, since in those states suicide is considered a felony. But in Illinois a suicide try isn't a felony. So Marcia's death could only be called an accident."

"Remarkable," said Dr. Weiss. "I'm genuinely impressed. But in your exhaustive research and preparation, did it never occur to you that your so convincing performance might bring you before the State Lunacy Commission?"

"That was my miscalculation," said Evans.

"But if you get out of here with a clinical release saying you were never crazy, you'll only be tried for murder and will have gained nothing."

"I'll have gained a chance for freedom. I'm denied all civil rights

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here, including trial by a jury of my peers. I can't get outside help here, not even a lawyer. I'd have *some* chance with a court trial. And even in a penitentiary I'd have some human rights. I'd know my maximum sentence. I'd know when I'd be eligible for parole. And within limits I'd know what kind of behavior might shorten or extend my punishment."

Dr. Weiss shrugged. "You seem fairly sane, Evans. I won't deny it. But frankly, being or acting sane is the least likely way of ever getting out of here. It's highly suspect. And the administrators don't really believe in it."

Evans' body felt hard and just this side of trembling. "But how *do* you get out?"

"Find the right part."

"But what is it?"

"Whatever they want it to be."

"How—how do you know?" Evans whispered.

"You don't. It's so awfully arbitrary. And luck is always a factor. Otherwise you simply stay here and time does the rest. And there are things we can do." He grinned with sudden animation, stood up and waved his stumpy arms. "I'm starting a little theater here—of the Absurd. I've been conducting auditions and you've passed with flying colors, Evans. I certainly want you as a charter member of the repertory."

Evans felt something thread through his brain like a cold worm.

"Do you believe in transmigration of souls, Evans? Reincarnation?"

"I don't know. I never thought much about—"

"I hope you can believe and understand." He came around the desk quietly in his canvas shoes, reaching for Evans' hand. "And I'm sure you will, soon as we go into production."

He made a slight bow and said in an odd, grave tone, "I'm Constantin Stanislavski of the Moscow Art Theatre."

Somewhere inside Evans' head, distant at first but getting louder, he heard Big Ricci laughing.

"Q"

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a short story by

PETER LOVESEY

first publication in the United States

"I know no way of judging of the future but by the past." (Patrick Henry)

On the other hand—

"You can never plan the future by the past." (Edmund Burke)

A BRIDE IN THE BATH

by PETER LOVESEY

"Sorry, darling. I mean to have my bath and that's the end of it!" With a giggle and a swift movement of her right hand, Melanie Lloyd closed the sliding door of her bathroom. The catch fastened automatically with a reassuring click. Her husband William, frustrated on the other side, had installed the gadget himself. "None of your old-fashioned bolts or keys for us," he had announced, demonstrating it a week before the wedding. "The door secures itself when you slide it across from the inside. You can move it with one finger, you see, but once closed, it's as safe as your money in the bank."

She felt between her shoulders for the tab of her zipper. William could wait for her. Sit in bed and wait while she had a leisurely bath. What was the purpose of a luxurious modern bathroom if not to enjoy a bath at one's leisure? William, after all, had spent *weeks* before the wedding modernizing it. "Everything but the kitchen sink," he had joked. "Mixer taps, spray attachment, separate shower, bidet, heated towel rails, and built-in cupboards. You shall bathe like a queen, my love. Like a queen."

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Queenly she had felt when she first stepped through the sliding door and saw what he had prepared for her. It was all there exactly as he had promised, and more. Ceramic mosaic tiles. Concealed lighting. Steam-proof mirrors. And the floor—wantonly impractical!—carpeted in white, with a white fur rug beside the bath. There was also a chair, an elegant antique chair, over which he had draped a full-length lace negligee. "Shameless Victoriana," he had whispered. "Quite out of keeping with contemporary design, but I'm incurably sentimental." Then he had kissed her.

In that meeting of lips she had shed her last doubts about William, those small nagging uncertainties that would probably never have troubled her if Daddy had not kept on so. "I'm old-fashioned, I know, Melanie, but it seems to me an extraordinarily short engagement. *You* feel that you know him, I've no doubt, but he's met your mother and me only once—and that was by accident. The fellow seemed downright evasive when I questioned him about his background. It's an awkward thing to do, asking a man things like that when he's damned near as old as you are, but, hang it, it's a father's right to know the circumstances of the man who proposes marrying his daughter, even if he is past fifty. Oh, I've nothing against his age; there's plenty of successful marriages on record between young women and older men. Nothing we could do to stop you, or would. You're over twenty-one and old enough to decide such things for yourself. The point is that he knew why I was making my inquiries. I wasn't probing his affairs from idle curiosity. I had your interests at heart, damn it. If the fellow hasn't much behind him, I'd be obliged if he'd say so, so that I can make a decent contribution. Set you both up properly. I would, you know. I've never kept you short, have I? Wouldn't see you come on hard times for anything in the world. If only the fellow would make an honest statement . . ."

One didn't argue with Daddy. It was no use trying to talk to him about self-respect. Every argument was always swept aside by that familiar outpouring of middle-class propriety. God, if anything drove her into William Lloyd's arms, Daddy did!

She stepped out of the dress and hung it on one of the hooks provided on the wall of the shower compartment. Before removing her slip she closed the Venetian blind; not that she was excessively modest, nor, for that matter, that she imagined her new neighbors in Bismarck Road were the sort who looked up at bathroom windows. The plain fact was that she was used to frosted glass. When she and William had first looked over the house—it seemed years ago, but

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it could only have been last April—the windows, more than anything else, had given her that feeling of unease. There were several in the house—they had been common enough in Victorian times when the place was built—small oblong frames of glass with frostwork designs and narrow stained-glass borders in deep red and blue.

They would have to come out, she decided at once, if William insisted on living there. They seemed so out of keeping, vaguely ecclesiastical, splendid in a chapel or an undertaker's office, but not in *her* new home. William agreed at once to take them out—he seemed so determined to buy that one house. "You won't recognize the place when I've done it up. I'll put a picture window in the bathroom. The old frames need to come out anyway. The wood's half-rotten outside." So the old windows went and the picture window, a large single sheet of glass, replaced them. "Don't worry about ventilation," William assured her. "There's an exhaust fan built in above the cabinet there." He had thought of everything.

Except frosted glass. She *would* have felt more comfortable behind frosted glass. But it wasn't *contemporary*, she supposed. William hadn't consulted her, anyway. He seemed to know about these things. And there *were* the Venetian blinds, pretty plastic things, so much more attractive than the old brown pelmet they replaced.

She fitted the plug and ran the water. Hot and cold came together from a lion's-head tap; you blended the water by operating a lever. Once you were in the bath you could control the intake of water with your foot, using a push-button mechanism. What would the first occupants of 9 Bismarck Road, eighty years ago, have thought of that?

Melanie reviewed the array of ornamental bottles on the shelf above the taps. Salts, oils, crystals, and foam-baths were prodigally provided. She selected an expensive bath oil and upended the bottle, watching the green liquid dispersed by the cascading water. Its musky fragrance was borne up on spirals of steam. How odd that William should provide all this and seem unwilling for her to use it! Each evening since Monday, when they had returned from the honeymoon, she had suggested she might take a bath and he had found some pretext for discouraging her. It didn't matter *that* much to her, of course. At the hotel in Herne Bay she had taken a daily bath, so she didn't feel desperately in need of one immediately they got back. It was altogether too trivial to make an issue of, she was quite sure. If William and she *had* to have words some time, it wasn't going to be about bath nights, at any rate. So she had played the

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part of the complaisant wife and fallen in with whatever distractions he provided.

Tonight, though, she had deliberately taken him by surprise. Nightie and book she had hidden in the towel chest earlier in the day, so when she hesitated at the head of the stairs as they came to bed he was quite unprepared. You don't go for a late-night bath empty-handed, even when your bathroom has every convenience known to the modern home designer. She was sliding the bathroom door across before he realized what had happened. "Sorry, darling. I mean to have my bath and that's the end of it!"

The door slid gently across on its runners and clicked, the whole movement perfectly timed, without a suspicion of haste, as neatly executed as a pass in the bull-ring. That was the way to handle an obstructive husband. Never mind persuasion and pleading; intelligent action was much more dignified, and infinitely more satisfying. Besides, she *had* waited till Friday.

She tested the water with her hand, removed her slip, took her book and plastic shower cap from the towel chest, shook her mass of flaxen hair, and then imprisoned it in the cap. She turned, saw herself unexpectedly in a mirror, and pulled a comical face. If she had remembered, she would have brought in a face-pack—the one thing William had overlooked when he stocked the cosmetic shelf. She wasn't going into the bedroom to collect one now, anyway. She took off the last of her underclothes and stepped into the bath.

It was longer than the bath at home or the one in the hotel. Silly, really: neither William nor she was tall, but they had installed a 6 foot 6 inch bath—"Two meters, you see," the salesman had pointed out, as though that had some bearing on their requirements. Over the years it would probably use gallons more hot water, but it was a beautiful shape—made for luxuriating—with the back at the angle of a deck chair on the lowest notch, quite unlike the utility five-footer at home, with its chipped sides and overhanging geyser that allowed you enough hot water to cover your knees and no more. William had even insisted on a sunken bath. "It will sink to four inches below floor level, but that's the limit, I'm afraid, or we'll see the bottom of it through the kitchen ceiling."

Accustomed to the temperature now, she pressed the button with her toe for more hot water. There was no hurry to rise from this bath. It wouldn't do Mr. William Lloyd any harm to wait. Not simply from pique, of course; she felt no malice toward him at all. No, there was just a certain deliciousness—a man wouldn't understand it even

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if you tried to explain—in taking one's time. Besides, it was a change, a relief if she was honest, to enjoy an hour of solitude, a break from the new experience of being someone's partner, accountable for every action in the day from cooking a dinner to clipping one's toenails.

She reached for a book—one she had found on William's bookshelf with an intriguing title, *Murder is Methodical*. Where better to read a thriller than in a warm bath behind a locked door? There hadn't been much opportunity for reading in the last three weeks. Or before, for that matter, with curtains to make and bridesmaids to dress.

She turned to the first page. Disappointing. It was not detective fiction at all. Just a dreary old manual on criminology. "William Palmer: the Rugeley Poisoner" was the first chapter. She thumbed the pages absently. "Dr. Crippen: a Crime in Camden Town." How was it that these monsters continued to exert such a fascination on people, years after their trials and executions? The pages fell open at a more whimsical title—from her present position, anyway —"George Joseph Smith: the Brides in the Baths."

Melanie smiled. That chapter ought to have a certain piquancy, particularly as one of the first place names to catch her eye was Herne Bay. Strange how very often one comes across a reference to a place soon after visiting there. With some slight stirring of interest she propped the book in the chromium soap holder that bridged the sides of the bath, dipped her arms under the water, leaned back and began to read.

George Joseph Smith had stayed in Herne Bay, but not at the New Excelsior. Wise man! If the food in 1912 was anything like the apologies for cuisine they dished up these days, he and his wife were far better off at the house they took in the High Street. But it wasn't really a honeymoon the Smiths—or the Williamses, as they called themselves—spent at Herne Bay, because they had been married two years before and he had deserted her soon after, only to meet her again in 1912 on the prom at Weston-super-Mare. In May they had come to Herne Bay and on July 8th they made mutual wills. On July 9th, Smith purchased a new five-foot bath. Bessie, it seemed, decided to take a bath on the 12th, a Friday. At 8:00 a.m. next morning a local doctor recieved a note: "Can you come at once? I am afraid my wife is dead." On July 16th she was buried in a common grave, and Smith returned the bath to the supplier, saying he did not require it after all. Smith inherited £2,500.

£2,500. That must have been worth a lot in 1912. More, almost certainly, than the £5,000 policy William had taken out on her life.

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Really, when she considered it, the value of money declined so steadily that she doubted whether £5,000 would seem very much when they got it in 1995, or whenever it was. They might do better to spend the premiums now on decorating some of the rooms downstairs. Super to have a luxury bathroom, but they would have to spend a lot to bring the other rooms up to standard. "Insurance policies are security," William had said. "You never know when we might need it."

Well, security seemed important to him, and she could understand why. When you'd spent your childhood in an orphanage, with not a member of your family in the least interested in you, security was not such a remarkable thing to strive for. So he should have his insurance—it was rather flattering, anyway, to be worth £5,000—and the rest of the house would get decorated in due course.

There was another reason for insurance which she did not much like to think about. For all his energy and good looks William was fifty-six. When the policy matured he would be over eighty, she fifty-two. No good trying to insure him; the premiums would be exorbitant.

For distraction she returned to the book and read of the death of Alice Burnham in Blackpool in 1913. Miss Burnham's personal fortune had amounted to £140, but the resourceful George Joseph Smith had insured her life for a further £500. She had drowned in her bath a month after her wedding, on a Friday night in December. Strange, that Friday night again! Really, it was exquisitely spine-chilling to be sitting in one's bath on a Friday night reading such things, even if they had happened half a century ago.

The Friday bath night, in fact, she learned as she read on, was an important part of Smith's infamous system. Inquest and funeral were arranged before there was time to make contact with the relatives, even when he wrote to them on the Saturday. Alice Burnham, like Bessie Mundy, was buried in a common grave early the following week. "When they're dead, they're dead," Smith had explained to his landlord.

Melanie shuddered slightly and looked up from the book. The appalling callousness of the murderer was conveyed with extraordinary vividness in that remark of his. For nearly twenty years he had exploited impressionable girls for profit, using a variety of names, marrying them, if necessary, as unconcernedly as he seduced them, and disappearing with their savings. In the early encounters, those who escaped being burdened with a child could consider them-

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selves fortunate; his later brides were lucky if they escaped with their lives.

It was reassuring for a moment to set her eyes on her modern bathroom, its white carpet and ceramic tiles. Modern, luxurious, and *civilized.* Smith and his pathetic brides inhabited a different world. What kind of bathroom had those poor creatures met their fates in? She had a vision of a cheap tin bath set on cold linoleum and filled from water jugs, illuminated by windows with colored-glass panels. Not so different, she mused, from the shabby room William had converted—transformed, rather—for her into this dream of a modern bathroom. Lying back in the water, she caught sight of the cornice William had repainted, highlighting the molding with gold paint. So like him to preserve what he admired from the past and reconcile it with the strictly contemporary.

Friday night! She cupped some water in her hands and wetted her face. George Joseph Smith and his crimes had already receded enough for her to amuse herself with the thought that his system would probably work just as well today as it did in 1914. The postal service hadn't improved much in all those years. If, like Daddy, you insisted on living without a telephone, you couldn't get a letter in Bristol before Monday to say that your daughter had drowned in London on Friday evening.

How dreadfully morbid! More hot water with the right toe and back to the murders, quite remote now. When had Smith been tried and executed?—1915—well, her own William had been alive then, if only a baby. Perhaps it wasn't so long. Poor William, patiently waiting for her to come to bed. It wouldn't be fair to delay much longer. How many pages to go?

She turned to the end to see, and her eyes were drawn at once to a paragraph describing the medical evidence at Smith's trial. "The great pathologist, Sir Bernard Spilsbury, stated unequivocally that a person who fainted while taking a bath sitting in the ordinary position would fall against the sloping back of the bath. If water were then taken in through the mouth or nose it would have a marked stimulating effect and probably make the person recover. There was no position, he contended, in which a person could easily become submerged in fainting. A person standing or kneeling might fall forward on the face and then might easily be drowned. Then, however, the body would be lying face downward in the water. The jury already knew that all three women had been found lying on

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their backs, for Smith's claim that Miss Lofty was lying on her side was nonsense in view of the size of the bath at Bismarck Road."

Bismarck Road! Melanie jerked up in the water and read the words again. Extraordinary. God, how horrible! It couldn't possibly be. She snatched up the book and turned back the pages, careless of her wet hands. There it was again! "Margaret made her will and bequeathed everything, nineteen pounds (but he had insured her life for £700) to her husband. Back at Bismarck Road, Highgate, a bath was installed that Friday night. Soon after 7:30 the landlady, who was ironing in her kitchen, heard splashes from upstairs and a sound which might have been wet hands being drawn down the side of the bath. Then there was a sigh. Shortly after, she was jolted by the sound of her own harmonium in the sitting room. "Mr. John Lloyd," alias George Joseph Smith, was playing *Nearer, My God, to Thee.*

Mr. John Lloyd! Mr. John *Lloyd.* That name. Was it possible? William said he knew nothing of his parents. He had grown up in the orphanage. A foundling, he said, with nothing but a scrap of paper bearing his name; abandoned, apparently, by his mother in the summer of 1915. The summer, she now realized, of the trial of George Joseph Smith, alias John Lloyd, the deceiver and murderer of women. It was too fantastic to contemplate. Too awful . . . An unhappy coincidence. She refused to believe it.

But William—what if he believed it? Rightly or wrongly believed himself the son of a murderer? Might that belief have affected his mind, become a fixation, a dreadful, morbid urge to re-live George Joseph Smith's crimes?

It would explain all those coincidences: the honeymoon in Herne Bay; the insurance policy; the house in Bismarck Road; the new bath. Yet he had tried to keep her from having a bath, barred the way, as if unable to face the last stage of the ritual. And tonight she had tricked him and she was there, a bride in the bath. And it was Friday.

Melanie's book fell in the water and she sank against the back of the bath and fainted. An hour later her husband, having repeatedly called her name from outside the bathroom, broke through the sliding door and found her. That, at any rate, was the account William Lloyd gave of it at the inquest. She had fainted. Accidental death. A pity Sir Bernard Spilsbury could not have been in court to demonstrate that it was impossible. Even in a two-meter bath.

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a *NEW* short story by

LAWRENCE BLOCK

As quietly tense and moving a story as you've ever read about one of the most heartbreaking of crimes . . .

GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

On the way home I picked up a sack of burgers and French fries at the fast-food place near the Interstate off-ramp. I popped a beer, but before I got it poured or the meal eaten I checked my phone-answering machine. There was a message from Anson Pollard asking me to call him right away. His voice didn't sound right, and there was something familiar in what was wrong with it.

I ate a hamburger and drank half a beer, then made the call. He said, "Thank God, Lou. Can you come over here?"

"What's the matter?"

"Come over and I'll tell you."

I went back to the kitchen table, unwrapped a second hamburger, then wrapped it up again. I bagged the food and put it in the fridge, poured the rest of the beer down the sink.

The streetlights came on while I was driving across town to his place. No question, the days were getting longer. Not much left of spring. I switched on my headlights and thought how fast the years were starting to go, and how Anson's voice hadn't sounded right.

I parked at the head of his big circular driveway. My engine went on coughing for ten or twenty seconds after I cut the ignition. It'll do that, and the kid at the garage can't seem to figure out what to do about it. I'd had to buy my own car after the last election, and

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this had been as good as I could afford. Of course it didn't settle into that coughing routine until I'd owned it a month, and now it wouldn't quit.

Anson had the door open before I got to it. "Lou," he said, and gripped me by the shoulders.

He was only a year older than me, which made him forty-two, but he was showing all those years and more. He was balding and carried too much weight, but that wasn't what did it. His whole face was drawn and desperate, and I put that together with his tone of voice and knew what I'd been reminded of over the phone. He'd sounded the same way three years ago when Paula died.

"What's the matter, Anse?"

He shook his head. "Come inside," he said. I followed him to the room where he kept the liquor. Without asking, he poured us each a full measure of straight bourbon. I didn't much want a drink but I took it and held onto it while he drank his all the way down. He shuddered, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Beth's been kidnaped," he said.

"When?"

"This afternoon. She left school at the usual time. She never got home. This was in the mailbox when I got home. It didn't go through the mails. They just stuck it in the box."

I removed a sheet of paper from the envelope he handed me, unfolded it. Words cut from a newspaper, pasted in place with rubber cement. I brought the paper close to my face and sniffed at it.

He asked me what I was doing. "Sometimes you can tell by the smell when the thing was prepared. The solvent evaporates, so if you can still smell it it's recent."

"Does it matter when they prepared the note?"

"Probably not. Force of habit, I guess." I'd been sheriff for three terms before Wallace Hines rode into office on the Governor's coattails. Old habits die hard.

"I just can't understand it," he was saying. "She knew not to get in a stranger's car. I don't know how many times I told her."

"I used to talk about that at school assemblies, Anse. 'Don't go with strangers. Don't accept food or candy from people you don't know. Cross at corners. Don't ever play with an old icebox.' Lord, all the things you have to tell them."

"I can't understand it."

"How old is Bethie?" I'd almost said *was*, caught myself in time. That would have crushed him. The idea that she might already be

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dead was one neither of us would voice. It hung in the room like a silent third party to the conversation.

"She's nine. Ten in August. Lou, she's all I've got in the world, all that's left to me of Paula. Lou, I've got to get her back."

I looked at the note again. "Says a quarter of a million dollars," I said.

"I know."

"Have you got it?"

"I can raise it. I'll go talk to Jim McVeigh at the bank tomorrow. He doesn't have to know what I need it for. I've borrowed large sums in cash before on a signature loan, for a real-estate deal or something like that. He won't ask too many questions."

"Says old bills, out of sequence. Nothing larger than a twenty. He'll fill an order like that and think it's for real estate?"

He poured himself another drink. I still hadn't touched mine. "Maybe he'll figure it out," he said. "He still won't ask questions. And he won't carry tales, either."

"Well, you're a good customer down there. And a major stockholder, aren't you?"

"I have some shares, yes."

I looked at the note, then at him. "Says no police and no F.B.I.," I said. "What do you think about that?"

"That's what I was going to ask you."

"Well, you might want to call Wally Hines. They tell me he's the sheriff."

"You don't think much of Hines."

"Not a whole lot," I admitted, "but I'm prejudiced on the subject. He doesn't run the department the way I did. Well, I didn't do things the way my predecessor did, either. Old Bill Hurley. He probably didn't think much of me, old Hurley."

"Should I call Hines?"

"I wouldn't. It says here they'll kill her if you do. I don't know that they're watching the house, but it wouldn't be hard for them to know if the Sheriff's Office came in on the operation." I shrugged. "I don't know what Hines could do, to tell you the truth. You want to pay the ransom?"

"Of course I do."

"Hines could maybe set up a stakeout, catch the kidnaper when he picks up the ransom. But they generally don't release the victim until after they get away clean with the ransom." If ever, I thought. "Now as far as the F.B.I. is concerned, they know their job. They

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can look at the note and figure out what newspaper the words came from, where the paper was purchased, the envelope, all of that. They'll dust for fingerprints and find mine and yours, but I don't guess the kidnaper's were on here in the first place. What you might want to do, you might want to call the Bureau as soon as you get Bethie back. They've got the machinery and the know-how to nail those boys afterward."

"But you wouldn't call them until then?"

"I wouldn't," I said. "Not that I'm going to tell you what to do or not to do, but I wouldn't do it myself. Not if it were my little girl."

We talked about some things. He poured another drink and I finally got around to sipping at the one he'd poured for me when I first walked in. We'd been in that same room three years ago, drinking the same brand of whiskey. He'd managed to hold himself together through Paula's funeral, and after everybody else cleared out and Bethie was asleep, he and I settled in with a couple of bottles. Tonight I would take it easy on the booze, but that night three years ago I'd matched him drink for drink.

Out of the blue he said, "She could have been, you know." I missed the connection. "Could have been your little girl," he explained. "Bethie could have. If you'd have married Paula."

"If your grandmother had wheels she'd be a tea cart."

"But she'd still be your grandmother! Isn't that what we used to say? You could have married Paula."

"She had too much sense for that." Though the cards might have played that way, if Anson Pollard hadn't come along. Now Paula was three years dead, dead of anaphylactic shock from a bee sting, if you can believe it. And the woman I'd married, and a far cry from Paula she was, had left me and gone to California. I heard someone say that the Lord took the United States by the State of Maine and lifted, so that everything loose wound up in Southern California. Well, she was and she did, and now Anse and I were a couple of solitary birds growing long in the tooth. Take away thirty pounds and a few million dollars and a nine-year-old girl with freckles and you'd be hard pressed to tell us apart.

Take away a nine-year-old girl with freckles. Somebody had done just that.

"You'll see me through this," he said. "Won't you, Lou?"

"If it's what you want."

"I wish to hell you were still the sheriff. The voters of this county never had any sense."

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"Maybe it's better that I'm not. This way I'm just a private citizen, nobody for the kidnapers to get excited about."

"I want you to work for me after this is over."

"Well, now."

"We can work out the details later. By God, I should have hired you the minute the election results came in. I figured we knew each other too well, we'd been through too much together. But you can do better working for me than you're doing now, and I can use you, I know I can. We'll talk about it later."

"We'll see."

"Lou, we'll get her back, won't we?"

"Sure we will, Anse. Of course we will."

Well, you have to go through the motions. There was no phone call that night. If the victim's alive they generally make a call and let you hear their voice. On tape, maybe, but reading that day's newspaper so you can place the recording in time. Any proof they can give you that the person's alive makes it that much more certain you'll pay the ransom.

Of course nothing's hard and fast. Kidnaping's an amateur crime and every fool who tries it has to make up his own rules. So it didn't necessarily prove anything that there was no call.

I hung around, waiting it out with him. He hit the bourbon pretty hard but he was always a man who could take on a heavy load without showing it much. Somewhere along the way I went into the kitchen and made a pot of coffee.

A little past midnight I said, "I don't guess there's going to be a call tonight, Anse. I'm going to head for home."

He wanted me to stay over. He had reasons—in case there was a call in the middle of the night, in case something called for action. I told him he had my number and he could call me at any hour. But we both knew his real reason—he didn't want to be alone there. I thought about staying with him and decided I didn't want to. The hours were just taking too long to go by, and I didn't figure I'd get a good night's sleep under his roof.

I drove right on home. I kept it under the speed limit because I didn't want one of Wally Hines's eager beavers coming up behind me with the siren wailing. They'll do that now. We hardly ever gave out tickets to local people when I was running the show, just a warning and a soft one at that. We saved the tickets for the leadfoot

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tourists. Well, another man's apt to have his own way of doing things.

In my own house I popped a beer and ate my leftover hamburger. It was cold with the grease congealed on it, but I was hungry enough to get it down. I could have had something out of Anse's refrigerator but I hadn't been hungry while I was there.

I sat in a chair and put on Johnny Carson but didn't even try to pay attention. I thought how little Bethie was dead and buried somewhere and nobody would likely ever find her. Because that was the way it read, even if it wasn't what Anse and I dared to say to each other. I sat there and thought how Paula was dead of a bee sting and my wife was on the other side of the continent and now Bethie. Thoughts swirled around in my head like water going down a bathtub drain.

I was up a long while. The television was still on when they were playing the Star Spangled Banner, and I might as well have been watching programs in Japanese for all the sense they made to me.

Somewhere down the line I went to bed.

I was eating a sweet roll and drinking a cup of coffee when he called. There'd been a phone call just moments earlier from the kidnaper, he told me, his voice hoarse with the strain of it all.

"He whispered. I was half asleep, I could barely make out what he was saying. I was afraid to ask him to repeat anything. I was just afraid, Lou."

"You get everything?"

"I think so. I have to buy a special suitcase, I have to pack it a certain way and chuck it in a certain spot at a certain time." He mentioned some of the specifics. I was only half listening. Then he said, "I asked them to let me talk to Bethie."

"And?"

"It was as if he didn't even hear me. He just went on telling me things, and I asked him again, and he hung up."

She was dead and in the ground, I thought.

I said, "He probably made the call from a pay phone. Most likely they're keeping her at a farmhouse somewhere and he wouldn't want to chance a trace on the call. He wouldn't have her along to let her talk, he wouldn't want to take the chance. And he'd speed up the conversation to keep it from being traced at all."

"I thought of that, Lou. I just wished I could have heard her voice."

He'd never hear her voice again, I thought. My mind filled with

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an image of a child's broken body on a patch of ground, and a big man a few yards from her, holding a shovel, digging. I blinked my eyes, trying to chase the image, but it just went and hovered there on the edge of thought.

"You'll hear it soon enough," I said. "You'll have her back soon."

"Can you come over, Lou?"

"Hell, I'm on my way."

I poured what was left of my coffee down the sink. I took the sweet roll with me, ate it on the way to the car. The sun was up but there was no warmth in it yet.

In the picture I'd had, with the child's corpse and the man digging, a light rain had been falling. But there'd been no rain yesterday and it didn't look likely today. A man's mind'll do tricky things, fill in details on its own. A scene like that, gloomy and all, it seems like there ought to be rain. So the mind just sketches it in.

On the way to the bank he said, "Lou, I want to hire you."

"Well, I don't know," I said. "I guess we can talk about it after Bethie's back and all this is over, but I'm not even sure I want to stay around town, Anse. I've been talking with some people down in Florida and there might be something for me down there."

"I can do better for you than some strangers down in Florida," he said gruffly. "But I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about now. I want to hire you to help me get Bethie back."

I shook my head. "You can't pay me for that, Anson."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I won't take the money. Did you even think I would?"

"No. I guess I just wish you would. I'm going to have to lean on you some, Lou. It seems a lot to ask as a favor."

"It's not such a much," I said. "All I'll be doing is standing alongside you and backing you up." Going through the motions with you, I thought.

I waited in the car while he went into the bank. I might have played the radio but he'd taken the car keys with him. Force of habit, I guess. I just sat and waited.

He didn't have the money when he came out. "Jim has to make a call or two to get that much cash together," he explained. "It'll be ready by two this afternoon."

"Did he want to know what it was for?"

"I told him I had a chance to purchase an Impressionist painting

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from a collector who'd had financial reverses. The painting's provenance was clear but the sale had to be a secret and the payment had to be in cash for tax purposes."

"That's a better story than a real-estate deal."

He managed a smile. "It seemed more imaginative. He didn't question it. We'd better buy that suitcase."

We parked in front of a luggage and leather goods store on Grandview Avenue. I remembered they'd had a holdup there while I was sheriff. The proprietor had been shot in the shoulder but had recovered well enough. I went in with him and Anson bought a plaid canvas suitcase. The whisperer had described the bag very precisely.

"He's a fussy son of a gun," I said. "Maybe he's got an outfit he wants it to match."

Anse paid cash for the bag. On the drive back to his house I said, "What you were saying yesterday, Anse, that Bethie could have been mine. She's the spit and image of you. You'd hardly guess she was Paula's child."

"She has her mother's softness, though."

A child's crumpled body, a man turning shovels of earth, a light rain falling. I kept putting the rain into that picture. A mind's a damn stubborn thing.

"Maybe she does," I said. "But one look at her and you know she's her father's daughter."

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. I pictured Paula in my mind, and then Bethie. Then my own wife, for some reason, but it was a little harder to bring her image into focus.

Until it was time to go to the bank we sat around waiting for the phone to ring. The whisperer had told Anse there wouldn't be any more calls, but what guarantee was that?

He mostly talked about Paula, maybe to keep from talking about Bethie. It bothered me some, the turn the conversation was taking, but I don't think I let it show.

When the phone finally did ring it was McVeigh at the bank, saying the money was ready. Anse took the new plaid suitcase and got in his car, and I followed him down there in my own car. He parked in the bank's lot. I found a spot on the street. It was a little close to a fireplug, but I was behind the wheel with the motor running and didn't figure I had much to worry about from Wally's boys in blue.

He was in the bank a long time. I kept looking at my watch and

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every few hours another minute would pass. Then he came out of the bank's front door and the suitcase looked heavier than when he'd gone in there. He came straight to my car and went around to the back. I'd left the trunk unlocked and he tossed the suitcase inside and slammed the lid shut.

He got in beside me and I drove. "I feel like a bank robber," he said. "I come out with the money and you've got the motor running."

My car picked that moment to backfire. "Some getaway car," I said.

I kept an eye on the rear-view mirror. I'd suggested taking my car just in case anybody was watching him. McVeigh might have acted on suspicions, I'd told him, and might say something to law-enforcement people without saying anything to us. It wouldn't do to be tailed to the overpass where the exchange was supposed to take place. If the kidnapers spotted a tail they might panic and kill Bethie.

Of course I didn't believe for a moment she was still alive. But you play these things by the book. What else can you do?

No one was following us. I cut the engine when we got to the designated place. It was an overpass, and a good spot for a drop. A person could be waiting below, hidden from view, and he could pick up the suitcase and get out of there on foot and nobody up above could do anything about it.

The engine coughed and sputtered and finally cut out. Anse told me I ought to get it fixed. I didn't bother saying that nobody seemed to be able to fix it. "Just sit here," I told him. "I'll take care of it."

I got out of the car, went around to the trunk. He was watching as I carried the plaid suitcase and sent it sailing over the rail. I heard the car door open, and then he was standing beside me, trying to see where it had landed. I pointed to the spot but he couldn't see it, and I'n not sure there was anything to see.

"I can't look down from heights," he said.

"Nothing to look at anyway."

We got back in the car. I dropped him off at the bank, and on the way there he asked if the kidnapers would keep their end of the bargain. "They said she'd be delivered to the house within the next four hours," he said. "But would they take the chance of delivering her to the house?"

"Probably not," I told him. "Easiest thing would be to drive her into the middle of one town or another and just let her out of the

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car. Somebody'll find her and call you right off. Bethie knows her phone number, doesn't she?"

"Of course she does."

"Best thing is for you to be at home and wait for a call."

"You'll come over, Lou, won't you?"

I said I would. He went to get his car from the lot and I drove to my house to check the mail. It didn't take me too long to get to his place, and we sat around waiting for a call I knew would never come.

Because it was pretty clear somebody local had taken her. An out-of-towner wouldn't have known what a perfect spot that overpass was for dropping a suitcase of ransom money. An out-of-towner wouldn't have sent Anse to a specific luggage shop to buy a specific suitcase. An out-of-towner probably wouldn't have known how to identify Bethie Pollard in the first place.

And a local person wouldn't dare leave her alive, because she was old enough and bright enough to tell people who had taken her. It stood to reason that she'd been killed right away, as soon as she'd been snatched, and that her corpse had been covered with fresh earth before the ransom note had been delivered to Anson's mailbox.

After I don't know how long he said, "I don't like it, Lou. We should have heard something by now."

"Could be they're playing it cagey."

"What do you mean?"

"Could be they're watching that dropped suitcase, waiting to make sure it's not staked out."

He started. "Staked out?"

"Well, say you'd gone and alerted the Bureau. What they might have done is staked out the area of the drop and just watched and waited to see who picked up the suitcase. Now a kidnaper might decide to play it just as cagey his own self. Maybe they'll wait twenty-four hours before they make their move."

"God."

"Or maybe they picked it up before it so much as bounced, say, but they want to hold onto Bethie long enough to be sure the bills aren't in sequence and there's no electronic bug in the suitcase."

"Or maybe they're not going to release her, Lou."

"You don't want to think about that, Anse."

"No," he said. "I don't want to think about it."

He started in on the bourbon then, and I was relieved to see him do it. I figured he needed it. To tell the truth, I had a thirst for it myself right about then. Plain flat sitting and waiting is the hardest

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thing I know about, especially when you're waiting for something that's not going to happen.

I was about ready to make an excuse and go on home when the doorbell rang. "Maybe that's her now," he said. "Maybe they waited until dark." But there was a hollow tone in his voice, as if to say he didn't believe it himself.

"I'll get it," I told him. "You stay where you are."

There were two men at the door. They were almost my height, dressed alike in business suits and holding guns, nasty little black things. First thought I had was they were robbers, and what crossed my mind was how bad Anse's luck had turned.

Then one of them said, "F.B.I.," and showed me an ID I didn't have time to read. "Let's go inside," he said, and we did.

Anse had a glass in his hand. His face didn't look a whole lot different from before. If he was surprised he didn't show it.

One of them said, "Mr. Pollard? We kept the drop site under careful observation for three full hours. In that time no one approached the suitcase. The only persons who showed up were two boys approximately ten years old, and they never went near the suitcase."

"Ten years old," Anse said.

"After three hours Agent Boudreau and I went down and examined the suitcase. The only contents were dummy packages like this one." He showed a banded stack of bills, then riffled it to reveal that only the top and bottom bills were currency. The rest of the stack consisted of newspaper cut the size of bills.

"I guess your stakeout wasn't such a much," I said. "Anse, why didn't you tell me you decided to call the Bureau after all?"

"Jim McVeigh called them," he said. "They were there when I went to get the money. I didn't know anything about it until then."

"Well, either we beat 'em to the drop site or they don't know much about staking a place out. You get people who aren't local and it's easy for them to make a mistake, I guess. The kidnapers just went and switched suitcases on you. You saw a suitcase still lying in the weeds and you figured nobody'd come by yet, but it looks like you were wrong." I took a breath and let it out slow. "Maybe they saw you there after they told Anse not to go to the cops. Maybe that's why Bethie's not home yet."

"That's not why," one of them said. Boudreau, I guess his name was. "We were there to see you fling that case over the railing. I had it under observation through high-powered field glasses from

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the moment it landed and I didn't take my eyes off it until we went and had a look at it."

Must have been tiring, I thought, staring through binoculars for three full hours.

"Nobody touched the suitcase," the other one said. "There was a rip in the side from when it landed. It was the same suitcase."

"That proves a lot, a rip in the side of a suitcase."

"There was a switch," Boudreau said. "You made it. You had a second suitcase in the trunk of your car, underneath the blankets and junk you carry around. Mr. Pollard here put the suitcase full of money in your trunk. Then you got the other case out of the trunk and threw it over the railing."

"Her father taught her not to go with strangers," the other one said. I never did get his name. "But you weren't a stranger, were you? You were a friend of the family. The sheriff, the man who lectured on safety procedures. She got in your car without a second thought, didn't she?"

"Anse," I said, "tell them they're crazy, will you?"

He didn't say anything.

Boudreau said, "We found the money, Mr. Pollard. That's what took so long. We wanted to find it before confronting him. He'd taken up some floorboards and stashed the money under them, still in the suitcase it was packed in. We didn't turn up any evidence of your daughter's presence. He may never have taken her anywhere near his house."

"This is all crazy," I said, but it was as if they didn't hear me.

"We think he killed her immediately on picking her up," Boudreau went on. "He'd have to do that. She knew him, after all. His only chance to get away with it lay in murdering her."

My mind filled with that picture again. Bethie's crumpled body lying on the ground in that patch of woods the other side of Little Cross Creek. And a big man turning the damp earth with a shovel. I could feel a soreness in my shoulders from the digging.

I should have dug that hole the day before. Having to do it with Bethie lying there, that was a misery. Better by far to have it dug ahead of time and just drop her in and shovel over her, but you can't plan everything right.

Not that I ever had much chance of getting away with it, now that I looked at it straight on. I'd had this picture of myself down in the Florida sun with more money than God's rich uncle, but I don't guess

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I ever really thought it would happen that way. I suppose all I wanted was to take a few things away from Anson Pollard.

I sort of tuned out for a while there. Then one of them—I'm not even sure which one—was reading me my rights. I just stood there, not looking at anybody, least of all at Anse. And not listening too close to what they were saying.

Then they were asking me where the body was, and talking about checking the stores to find out when I'd bought the duplicate suitcase, and asking other questions that would build the case against me. I sort of pulled myself together and said that somebody was evidently trying real hard to frame me and I couldn't understand why, but in the meantime I wasn't going to answer any questions without a lawyer being present.

Not that I expected it would do me much good. But you have to make an effort, you have to play the hand out. What else can you do? You go through the motions, that's all.

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15 ***NEW*** stories — including

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EDWARD D. HOCH (about Rand)

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet, the unique thief, steals only the worthless—articles of no value whatever. Never money or bonds or jewelry or objets d'art. So the last employer in the world Nick Velvet ever expected to hire him, at his usual $25,000 fee (for pilfering nothing!), was the United States government. What could the United States government want that was completely valueless?

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THE THEFT OF THE RED BALLOON

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The man from Washington regarded Nick Velvet with some distaste as he spoke. "You understand it's not our practice to hire people who operate outside the law."

Nick merely smiled. When the man seemed to pause for a reply he said, "I'd understood differently."

"This isn't past administrations. We operate entirely within the law nowadays. But occasionally a situation arises which demands extra-legal assistance. We have some information and frankly we don't know quite how to act on it."

"What sort of information?"

"The details needn't concern you. My understanding was that you could be hired to steal valueless objects, with no questions asked."

"That's correct. What's the object?"

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"A child's red balloon."

"I'm to steal it from a child?"

"We don't know who'll be holding it."

"Then how will I know I have the right one?"

"You'll know. It'll be the only red balloon in the area."

Nick shifted in his chair. "My fee is twenty-five thous—"

"We know that. It'll be deposited to any bank account you wish, here or abroad."

"I see you've thought of everything. Where and when will I find this balloon?"

"At the Midstate Fairgrounds on Saturday—day after tomorrow. You should be there before noon."

"All right."

"One more thing: under no circumstances must the balloon be allowed to escape and float into the air above the crowd."

"It'll be filled with helium?"

"Correct. Just steal it and keep it at ground level."

"Should I break it?"

"No. Just take it and walk through the crowd. Don't let anyone stop you. I'll be waiting in a car just outside the entrance to the fairgrounds parking lot. Bring the balloon to me and your job is done."

"You mention a crowd. Will the fair be on?"

"The fair's on all week, but it may be especially crowded on Saturday."

"Then how can you be sure there'll be only one red balloon?"

"Take my word for it," the nameless man said.

"All right," Nick agreed.

The man from Washington stood up and shook Nick's hand. "Good luck, Velvet. A great deal depends on your success."

Nick spent most of the following day driving to the State Fair, on the outskirts of a small city about 250 miles from his home. Gloria was visiting her mother in California, and he was pleased for an excuse to take him away from the silent house. He was pleased about the money too. He hadn't had an assignment in months and his bank account showed it.

Still, working for the government was a bit out of his line and it made him uneasy. He had visions of ending up before some Congressional committee investigating a new version of Watergate. And his fears were hardly allayed when he checked into a motel a mile down

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the road from the fairgrounds and saw the sign in the lobby: *Come see U.S. Senator Bob Diamond at the State Fair—Saturday, 1 p.m.*

Bob Diamond. Though it was only the end of August, Nick knew Diamond was running for re-election. Somehow the theft of the red balloon was linked to the senator's campaign stop at the fairgrounds, and Nick didn't like that one bit. He was still staring at the sign when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hello, Mr. Velvet."

He turned and saw a blonde young woman wearing slacks and sweater. He knew her at once, but he tried to bluff his way out. "I'm afraid you've made some mistake."

"Cut the baloney! You're Nick Velvet and I'm Lawn Larson, Channel Six News. We met in New York when you stole that banker's ashtray."

He knew when he was licked. "Oh, yes, I remember you now. How've you been?"

She shrugged. "Busy making a living."

"What brings you up here?"

"Senator Diamond. He opens his campaign here tomorrow, and the election is a big issue back in the city. They sent me up to cover him. What about you? Still stealing things?"

"No, I gave that up."

"I'll bet. How about a drink?"

Nick hesitated only a second. "Sure, why not? Let me drop this bag in my room. I just checked in."

He came downstairs ten minutes later and found her waiting in the little cocktail lounge off the lobby. She'd ordered two beers and paid for them. "That's what you drink, right?"

"Sometimes," he agreed. "Tastes good after a long hot drive. But you shouldn't have paid for them."

"Goes on the expense account," she told him. "Now how about leveling with me, Nick. What are you doing here?"

"I had some free time, so I drove up to see the fair. No law against that."

"Senator Diamond brought you here, didn't he? You're going to steal something from him tomorrow."

"Not a chance!"

"Well, if it's not Diamond it's the UVA. There's sure nothing else to bring you up here!"

"What's the UVA?" Nick asked.

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"Unaffiliated Veterans of America. Are you faking or have you really never neard of them?"

"Not a word," Nick said, sipping his beer. "Tell me about them."

"They were founded here a few years ago by an extreme right-winger named Carl Mulley. Supposedly membership is open to any military veterans not affiliated with the traditional veterans' organizations. But a reporter for *The Times* tried to get a membership and it was denied. There are rumors it's an offshoot of the American Nazi Party, and the police investigated them in connection with a synagogue bombing, but nothing could be proved."

"What's their connection with Senator Diamond?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Did I say there was one?"

"No, but you thought of them together. Something connected them in your mind."

Lawn nodded. "The senator has been investigating the group for some time."

"Are they planning any sort of demonstration against him tomorrow?"

"Not that I know of, but with the UVA anything's possible. Now tell me why you're here." She leaned forward expectantly.

"Sorry to disappoint you. I just came for the fair."

"I got a good story out of that ashtray business. You won't disappoint me this time, will you?"

"I told you—"

Lawn Larson suddenly jumped up to intercept a slim blond man in a three-piece suit who was passing their table. "Mr. Poor! Lawn Larson from Channel Six News, New York. Remember me?"

A smile appeared beneath his neat blond mustache, but it wasn't reflected in his eyes. "Of course! You must be here for tomorrow's campaign kickoff."

"That's right. This is a friend of mine—Nick Velvet, meet Richard Poor, Senator Diamond's campaign manager."

"A pleasure," Nick said.

"You with the press too?" Poor asked.

"Freelance," Nick hedged.

"Glad to have you here." He was still quite young, Nick guessed, perhaps under thirty, but he'd already assumed the smooth composure of a skilled operator in the game of politics. He'd been annoyed at being stopped by Lawn Larson but now he settled down at their table, sensing a good opportunity to score points with the press.

"What can we look forward to tomorrow?" Lawn asked him.

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"Balloons!" Poor exclaimed, warming to the subject. "We've bought up all the other balloons at the fair and we'll be giving out helium-filled green and white ones to everyone at the rally. There'll be no other colors but Bob's familiar green and white! We have a photographer from *Time* ready to shoot it from a helicopter. It'll make a great photograph."

"Balloons," Nick repeated. "Green and white."

"I thought up the idea myself, and you've got an exclusive on it."

"Exclusive except for the *Time* man," Lawn reminded him.

"Look, if you can get a camera here, I'll see if there's room in the helicopter."

"I'll have a camera here," Lawn told him sweetly, "but it'll be on the ground, filming me as I report on the rally."

"All right, you'll still get good pictures."

"When I asked what we could look forward to, I meant Diamond's speech, not balloons."

"He's still working on it. Believe me, Lawn, as soon as copies are ready I'll have one in your hands."

"I hope so. I'm the only one up here from the New York stations."

"I won't let you down, Lawn. You'll have it before noon tomorrow. You're here at the hotel?"

She nodded. "Room 133."

He patted Nick on the shoulder and rose to leave. "Let me know if you need anything, Mr. Velvet."

"I'll do that."

When he was gone, Lawn Larson said simply, "He's a smooth one."

"He seems to be."

"He'll push Bob Diamond all the way to the White House."

"You think so?"

"Stranger things have happened."

When he left Lawn Larson, Nick drove over to the fairgrounds and spent an hour strolling around. It was just at dinnertime and the fast-food stands were crowded with customers. He joined them, munching on a hot dog as he contemplated the wooden platform bedecked with green and white pennants which stood at one end of the midway. He tried to imagine what it would be like the following noon, with a sea of green and white balloons and one red balloon in the middle of them.

He didn't like it. He didn't like it at all.

Presently Nick found a phone book and looked up the address of

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the Unaffiliated Veterans of America. He didn't know the city very well and it took him a half hour to reach the big old house no more than a mile away. A small brass plaque on the door was the only outward sign that he'd arrived at the right place. It was growing dark when he rang the bell and waited.

A tall middle-aged man wearing tinted glasses answered the door after several moments. He was in his shirtsleeves and seemed to have been interrupted at some task. "Yes?"

"This the UVA?" Nick asked.

"That's what the sign says."

"I'm a veteran and I was wondering about your membership requirements."

"I'm sorry. Our rolls are closed at the present time." He started to shut the door.

"Could you give me some information?"

"Not tonight. Call us next week."

"Could I see Carl Mulley?" Nick asked in desperation.

The man at the door hesitated. "I'm Carl Mulley."

"I was given your name—"

"By whom?"

Nick took a chance. "Senator Diamond's office."

Carl Mulley snorted. "The senator's office would hardly be giving out my name! If he sent you here to spy on me, it'll do him no good!" The door closed in Nick's face.

Well, he'd tried. He went back down the steps of the old house and got in his car. He didn't really know himself what he'd been after at the UVA headquarters. He only knew that he was vaguely troubled by the manner in which events were shaping up for the following day. One red balloon in a sea of green and white balloons could be a signal—but for what?

As he turned onto the street a movement in the rear-view mirror caught Nick's eye. He slammed on the brakes and something thumped against the back of his seat. He ducked his head and rolled beneath the dashboard, fearing instant attack.

Nothing happened.

Gradually Nick straightened up and snapped on the overhead light. He hadn't imagined it—there was a man in the back seat, his head bent forward.

There was blood on his chest and Nick knew the man was dead.

It took Nick only a few moments to go through the dead man's

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pockets and establish that he carried no identification. His wallet had a few dollars in cash and that was all. The chest wound seemed to have been caused by a knife, and though it was near the heart Nick knew it wouldn't have killed him instantly. Most likely the wounded man, fleeing his attackers, had taken refuge in the car before he died.

And it seemed more than likely the attack had occurred in the old house occupied by the UVA.

Nick debated his next course of action. Calling the police would only involve him in the investigation, and possibly keep him from the fairgrounds the following noon. But leaving the dead man in the car was far too dangerous. Finally he looked up the address of the nearest hospital and drove there. He left the body on the pavement near the emergency entrance and sped away in the darkness.

But he didn't return to the motel. Instead he drove back and parked a few blocks from the UVA building. He walked the rest of the way, circling the block once and then cutting through a back yard to approach the house from the rear. He saw a side door standing a few inches ajar, possibly left that way by the dying man as he staggered from the building.

Nick slipped inside, pausing to listen for sounds. There were voices far off, upstairs. He made his way to the basement, moving softly and shining his pocket flashlight along the walls, across the new gas furnace and the wooden partitions of unused coal bins from another era.

"Where in hell could Brewster have gotten to?" a voice suddenly asked, quite close.

Nick froze for an instant, then relaxed as he realized he was standing near an unused heating duct that had been part of the old coal furnace. The voice was coming through the duct from above, and he recognized it as belonging to Carl Mulley. Another voice was answering him. "He couldn't have gone far, Carl. Max went after him with a knife."

"Find him, that's all."

Nick heard footsteps as one or both men left the room. We waited until he was certain neither was headed toward the basement and then he moved again, shining his flashlight beam into one of the deserted coal bins.

There was a wooden crate in one corner—a crate with U.S. government markings.

Nick looked inside. It was half filled with flat discs that resembled

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plastic Frisbees. They seemed to be a type of explosive, a land mine which could be triggered either by pressure from above or by a short-range radio signal.

Nick remembered the synagogue bombing that Lawn had mentioned, and he thought he knew what the red balloon was meant to signal at the fairgrounds. A half dozen of these things, wired to explode by different frequencies of radio signal, could be buried there. The balloon could go up to signal when Senator Diamond was near one of the bombs, and that bomb could be detonated by radio.

One red balloon, in a sea of green and white.

And Nick Velvet had been hired to prevent it.

He slipped out the way he had come, and returned to his car. But when he reached the motel he didn't go directly to his room. Instead he knocked on the door of 133, which he remembered was Lawn Larson's room. She seemed pleased as she invited him in.

"Only for a minute," he assured her. "Does the name Brewster mean anything to you?"

"There's a Sam Brewster on Diamond's senatorial staff. What about him?"

"Have you seen him around town?"

"No, but I just got in today myself."

"All right. I'll see you in the morning."

"Wait a minute! Is that all I get?"

He grinned and left her there. Back in his room he thought about the explosives he'd uncovered and what it meant. A disaster at the fairgrounds had to be avoided at any cost. Still, he had a client and an assignment, and if all went well he should be able to steal the balloon and also prevent any loss of life.

Then he remembered the man named Brewster, dead in the back seat of his car.

It was already too late to prevent any loss of life.

Saturday was a sunny, lazy late-summer's day. As Nick drove up to the fairgrounds a little before noon he saw Lawn Larson standing by a truck marked with the Channel Six News logo. A young man in jeans and a T-shirt was with her, carrying a miniature television camera on his shoulder. He avoided them for the moment and parked across the highway in a lot that seemed a little less congested than the main one.

It was on that highway he'd be meeting the man from Washington, to deliver the red balloon. At the moment there was no one parked

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near the entrance to the fairgrounds and in fact two state police officers were directing traffic into the parking lots. He could only assume that the police would not bother the man from Washington when he arrived.

Nick strolled back toward the entrance, mingling with the family groups who were already lining up for free balloons. He recognized Diamond's campaign manager, Richard Poor, standing beside one of the tanks from which the green and white balloon were being inflated. Occasionally a child would lose his grip on the string and the helium-filled balloon sailed off into space.

"Big crowd," Nick said.

Poor looked up from his task of helping with the balloons. "Hello, Velvet. Glad you could make it. You'll be hearing quite a speech here today."

"Do you have advance copies?"

Poor pulled one from his briefcase and handed it to Nick. He brushed back the blond hair which had blown into his eyes and opened another box of balloons. "Bob Diamond is due here at one, and he's right on schedule."

"I'd like to get a good view of him on his way to the platform," Nick said. "Which way will he be coming in?"

"Don't know for sure. It'll depend on the size of the crowd when he arrives."

Nick tried to move around the crowd's fringes. He accepted a green balloon for himself and started searching for the red one—the single splash of color that would be out of place. But everything ahead of him was a sea of white and green.

Suddenly he was face to face with Carl Mulley.

The tall man stared through his tinted glasses and recognized Nick at once. "You're the one from last night," he said somewhat ambiguously.

"I came to your place about a membership in the UVA."

"What are you doing here?"

"I want to hear Diamond's speech."

Carl Mulley leaned forward, as if peering into Nick's soul. "Are you supporting Senator Diamond?"

"Haven't decided yet."

"You're carrying one of his balloons."

"That doesn't mean anything. One of his staff gave it to me."

"Staff?"

"A fellow named Brewster," Nick said and moved away quickly.

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He could feel Mulley's eyes boring into his back, wondering how much he knew.

Somewhere in the crowd a band struck up, playing a patriotic march, and presently a disembodied voice announced over a crackling loudspeaker that Senator Diamond was on his way. Nick moved deeper into the crowd, searching for the red balloon. He saw the Channel Six cameraman standing near the highway, his gear resting heavily on his shoulder as he smoked a cigarette and waited for the senator's arrival. Carl Mulley was nowhere in sight, and neither was Lawn Larson.

Nick glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes before one, and still there was no red balloon. From far down the highway came the sound of a police siren escorting Senator Diamond, and as he watched the motorcade took shape. The Channel Six cameraman ground his cigarette into the dust and reached for the miniature camera on his shoulder. The crowd was roaring its approval now, and Nick thought of the explosives beneath their feet. If his fears were correct he had to find that balloon.

Then he saw it.

Bobbing gently just above the sea of green and white.

A single red balloon.

He fought his way through the crowd, moving toward it while keeping it in sight. A small boy refused to budge and Nick pushed him gently aside. A large woman swore as he stepped on her toes.

But he was closer to the red balloon.

A sudden roar when up from the crowd and he knew Senator Diamond had arrived. He hadn't a second to lose. He elbowed his way through the last restraining wall of people and reached his goal.

Then he stopped dead.

The red balloon was tied to Lawn Larson's belt.

"Hi, Nick. I was looking for you," she said, standing on her toes to see above the crowd.

"What—what are you doing with that balloon on your belt?"

"Sometimes I use it in crowds so my cameraman can find me quickly. What's the matter? You look so surprised!"

"I—" Nick searched the crowd quickly, looking for a second red balloon. But the man from Washington had said there'd be only one and he seemed to be right.

Ahead of them the crowd was parting. He recognized Senator Diamond's white hair and smiling face, striding through the sea of

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humanity with hands out in both directions. A sheriff's deputy led the way to the speakers' platform, with Richard Poor and some other aides trailing along behind.

Nick could wait no longer. He had to risk it.

His nail clippers snipped through the string holding the balloon to Lawn's belt, and he caught it as it started to rise. Then he simply stood still and let the surging crowd separate him from Lawn. Finally Nick broke into the clear with the red balloon firmly in his grip. He realized he still carried the green one too and released it, letting it drift upward with the breeze. Then he walked quickly toward the highway.

The state police cars were still in position, and the long black limousines of the senator's motorcade were pulled off the road behind them. Nick could see no other cars. Was it possible the man from Washington was waiting for him in one of the motorcade vehicles?

Almost at once his question was answered. The door of the third car swung open and a familiar figure emerged. It was the nameless man who had hired him. "Good work, Velvet! You're right on schedule."

Nick handed over the red balloon. "Now can you tell me what this is all about? Was it an assassination attempt on the senator?"

"Assassination attempt? What gave you that idea?" He was trying to put the balloon into the car as he spoke, but somehow it got away from him. Before either of them could grab the string it floated free, out of the car and straight up into the sky.

That was when the first limousine in the motorcade blew up.

Nick hit the pavement hard, covering his head with his arms. All around him chunks of metal and glass were dropping from the sky. He heard shouts and running and a few screams, and when he finally lifted his head he saw the man from Washington struggling to his feet. There was a small cut on his cheek but otherwise he seemed all right.

"Quickly!" Nick urged. "Before the police reach us! Tell me what you know!"

"I don't—what was that?"

"Land mine, detonated electronically. I should have guessed they'd have one by the highway. It was the most logical place."

"I didn't know about any bomb," the man mumbled.

By then the state police and the rest of the crowd had reached them. Everyone was talking at once and Nick managed to slip away

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without effort while they examined the other man's bleeding cheek. He hurried back to the fairgrounds and spotted Lawn at once, standing by her cameraman as he filmed the smoking wreckage of the limousine.

"Nick, what happened? Are you all right?"

"Ripped the knee of my pants, that's all."

"I saw you going through the crowd with my balloon. Why did you take it?"

"Because someone paid me to."

"You mean you were hired to steal that red balloon from my belt? I can't believe it!"

"How many people knew your habit of wearing that in a crowd?"

"My cameraman, Joe, naturally. And some people back at the station."

"No one who's here? Think hard!"

"Wait a minute! That man Brewster, on Diamond's staff, saw me with one at a rally last week. He kidded me about it."

"Brewster." He remembered the dead man in his car.

"Tell me who's behind this bombing, Nick."

"Carl Mulley's UVA group. Brewster infiltrated them as part of Senator Diamond's investigation. But they killed Brewster last night and planned to assassinate the senator today. I found a stolen box of explosives in their basement."

"You found—?"

"Never mind that now. Get the police to search Mulley's place and they'll find it too."

Before she could answer, Richard Poor appeared at their side. "Velvet, the police tell me you were near the car when it exploded. Senator Diamond wants to speak with you."

"Gladly," Nick said. "Come along, Lawn."

"Not her—just you."

Nick shook his head. "If she doesn't come, I don't come. I want her to witness anything that's said."

Poor grumbled and said he'd have to check with Diamond. While Nick waited with Lawn they watched a fire engine spraying water on the smoldering car. There seemed to be police everywhere.

"Brewster's not dead at all," Lawn said suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"That's him over there, with the cut on his cheek. Didn't you know?"

"My God!"

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Poor came hurrying back. "All right," he said. "Lawn can come along."

Nick's mind was spinning. Brewster was the nameless man from Washington who had hired him, not the dead man in the back seat of his car. Everything was suddenly topsy-turvy.

Poor led them to a small tent behind the speakers' platform, where the police had ushered Diamond immediately after the explosion. Close up, the senator was even more impressive than on television. "You're Nick Velvet?" he asked, holding out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

"A pleasure, Senator."

"You were with Brewster when that bomb went off in the motorcade?"

"That's correct. The bomb was planted right beneath where the car was parked."

"So we understand." He turned to Lawn Larson. "This is completely off the record, Miss Larson. I'll have a statement for you later."

Lawn bristled at that. "Sorry, no agreement. I'm here as a working reporter."

The senator turned to his campaign manager. "Richard, can't you do something about this?"

Poor started to speak but Nick stopped him. "If she goes, I go. And I think you want to hear what I have to say."

"Not really," Poor said. "The police have arrested Carl Mulley on suspicion. I'm sure he's behind the bombing."

"Don't be too certain," Nick said. "For one thing, who's Brewster?"

Senator Diamond frowned. "One of my best staff investigators. Everyone knows that."

"He hired me to steal something here today. I was led to believe he was some sort of government agent."

"In a sense he is. We have broad investigative powers, as you must know. But what does that matter? The important thing is that someone tried to kill me here today."

Nick took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I think you're mistaken, Senator. There was no assassination attempt. It was all a phony plot engineered by your man Brewster."

Senator Diamond's face flushed with anger. "What do you mean? One of my cars was blown up!"

"When you were a safe distance away from it," Nick reminded

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him. "I was led to believe that a red balloon, rising above the crowd, would be a signal to direct an explosion aimed at you, Senator. But there are two reasons why the idea doesn't hold up. First of all, the person who sent the radio signal detonating the bomb had to have a clear view above the crowd so he could see the balloon when it was released. But if he had that view, he must have seen you, Senator, already on the raised speakers' platform. You were far away from the motorcade and he had to know that when he pressed the button. Also, of course, the idea of a confederate who freed the balloon from Lawn's waist as you passed by didn't make sense. There was too much of a chance the confederate would be blown up too."

"What are you saying, Velvet?" Poor demanded. "How does this implicate Brewster?"

"I'm saying there was no assassination plot. Brewster infiltrated Mulley's rightist organization and decided to help the Diamond reelection campaign by faking an assassination attempt which could be blamed on Mulley. He planted some explosives in their basement where they'd easily be found, and he buried a single bomb near where the lead car in the motorcade would park. That was something your staff would know far better than Mulley.

"Sometime last night Mulley discovered Brewster's identity and one of his men, Max, chased Brewster from the house. There was a struggle and Brewster stabbed Max, possibly in self-defense. Max staggered back toward the house, made it to my car, and died there. When I found the body and overheard a conversation by Mulley, I foolishly concluded the body was Brewster's. But it had to be Max. If Max killed Brewster he'd have returned to the house to report. Since neither man returned it had to be Max who died and Brewster who made good his escape."

"Why would Brewster hire you to steal my balloon?" Lawn asked.

"He had to appear as if he were trying to foil the plot. When he saw your red balloon that gave him the idea for the supposed signal. Since he had infiltrated Mulley's group, he couldn't plead total ignorance of the plot. I would steal the balloon and deliver it to him. He'd accidentally let it loose, and someone—supposedly Mulley—would see it rise and set off the nearest bomb. Actually it was Brewster himself who'd set off the *only* bomb—the one just two cars away. According to his plan, he'd still get credit for helping to foil the assassination, the Diamond campaign would get reams of favorable publicity, and Mulley would go to jail."

Senator Diamond turned to Poor. "What do you know about this?"

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"Nothing! I swear it!"

"Get Brewster in here."

Nick still thought of him as the nameless man from Washington, even now with his jacket ripped and his cut face bandaged. He looked from Nick to Lawn to Senator Diamond and he knew the truth was out. "I did it all for you, Senator!" he insisted. "I knew the press would be far more sympathetic after a right-wing assassination attempt."

"I don't want a sympathy vote, Brewster. Most of all, I don't want to be connected with framing an innocent man—even a man like Carl Mulley."

"What about the one who was killed last night?" Nick asked Brewster.

"That was an accident. They found out who I was. Mulley saw my picture in an old *Time* magazine, and I had to get out of there fast. Max chased me through the back yards with a knife. We struggled and he stabbed himself. He staggered back toward the house and I thought he might live."

"He lived as far as my car," Nick said. "He couldn't make it any farther."

Senator Diamond pursed his lips. "Richard, get the police in here. Since the press already has this, there's no way of keeping it secret—is there, Miss Larson?"

"No way at all, Senator."

Nick cleared his throat. "There's a little matter of my fee for stealing the balloon."

"Mr. Velvet," Diamond said quietly, "I'd suggest you stop worrying about your fee and be happy you can walk out of here a free man."

Nick decided that Senator Diamond was probably right.

"Q"

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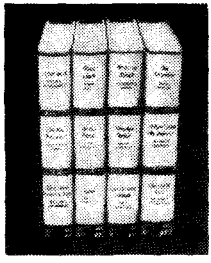

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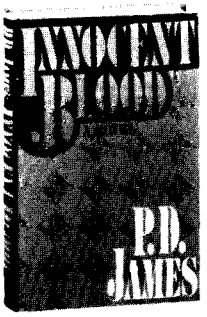

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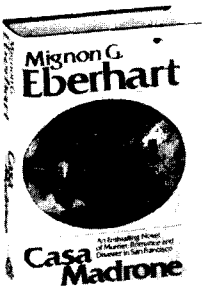

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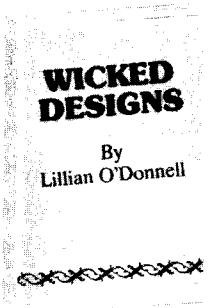

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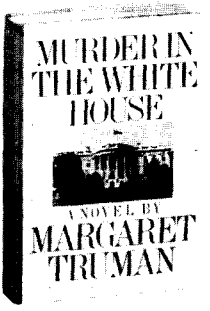

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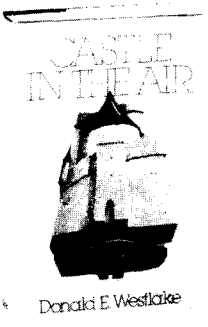

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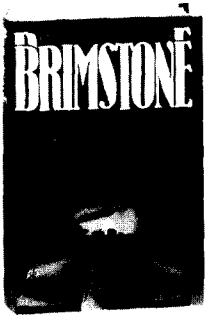

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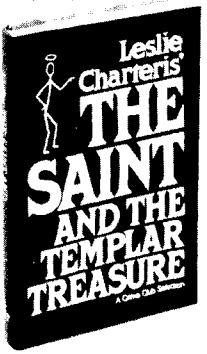

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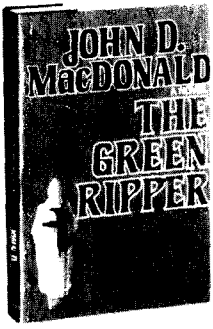

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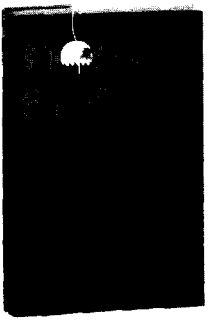

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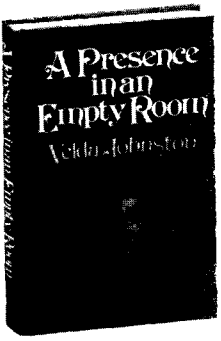

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